

# LAW ENFORCEMENT COUPLES AND TRAUMA

Exploring the Impact of Work-Related Traumatic Stress on Law Enforcement Couples

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### ABSTRACT

Studies exploring the impact of work-related traumatic stress on law enforcement couples are limited. Such studies suggest that when work-related traumatic stress impacts law enforcement professionals, their spouses may experience secondary traumatic stress and serve in a supportive role following trauma exposure. Grounded in secondary traumatic stress theory, this study explored the impact of work-related traumatic stress on law enforcement couples. Semi-structured dyadic interviews were conducted with law enforcement couples ( $N = 7$ ) using transcendental phenomenology. Three themes emerged within the data that captured the essence of law enforcement couple experiences of work-related traumatic stress: (1) the stressful nature of the law enforcement profession, (2) the impact of work-related traumatic stress on the couple relationship, and (3) resilient couple characteristics. The impact of work-related traumatic stress manifested in couple's communication, role responsibilities and parenting, and commitment to the relationship and the profession. Whereas the impact of work-related traumatic events differed for the law enforcement professional and their spouse based on the type of traumatic event, overall work-related traumatic stress led couples to engage in a meaning making process and activation of resilient couple coping characteristics. Given the significant impact that work-related traumatic stress has on the law enforcement couple dyad, couples therapy interventions are needed for law enforcement professionals and their spouses.

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### GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

Law enforcement professionals often experience symptoms of traumatic stress as a result of repeated exposure to work-related traumatic events. Spouses of law enforcement professionals may also experience secondary traumatic stress and serve in a supportive role following work-related traumatic stress exposure. This study explored the impact of work-related traumatic stress on law enforcement couples. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with law enforcement couples ( $N = 7$ ) using transcendental phenomenology. Couples experienced work-related stress related to the nature of the law enforcement professional's work outside of the instances of work-related traumatic events. Job demands and expectations of police culture contributed to work-related stress along with the stress of work-related traumatic events. Three themes emerged within the data that captured the essence of law enforcement couple experiences including: (1) the stressful nature of the law enforcement profession, (2) the impact of work-related traumatic stress on the couple relationship, and (3) resilient couple characteristics. The impact of work-related traumatic stress manifested in couple's communication, role responsibilities and parenting, and commitment to the relationship and the profession. While the impact of work-related traumatic events differed for the law enforcement professional and their spouse based on the type of traumatic event, overall work-related traumatic stress led couples to engage in a meaning making process and activation of resilient couple coping characteristics. Given the significant impact that work-related traumatic stress has on the law enforcement couple dyad, interventions are needed for law enforcement couples.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

### **The Problem and Its Setting**

Approximately 662,390 individuals are presently employed as law enforcement professionals in the United States (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). The law enforcement profession continues to attract approximately 45,000 new trainees each year with over 600 local and state law enforcement academies nationwide (Reaves, 2016). Law enforcement professionals are tasked with maintaining the order and protection of daily life through the enforcement of laws and ordinances. Their job entails preventing, detecting, and investigating crimes, along with apprehending and arresting suspects (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2018). Law enforcement professionals are considered first responders alongside emergency medical technicians (EMTs) and firefighters. In their efforts “to serve and protect”, law enforcement professionals face unique challenges that place them at increased risk for work-related injuries compared to other professions. In essence, law enforcement professionals are especially vulnerable to mental and physical injuries related to their increased exposure to violence (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016) such as forms of aggression, assault, rape, and murder. (Corsini & Ozaki, 1994).

In the line of duty, law enforcement professionals are frequently exposed to violent, life-threatening experiences (Gershon, Barocas, & Canton, 2009). However, they are left with limited opportunities to process these work-related traumatic stressors due to their demanding work schedules. Law enforcement professionals commonly display symptoms of post-traumatic stress following their exposure to work-related traumatic events (Gershon, Barocas, & Canton, 2009). According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder (5th ed.), the trigger to posttraumatic stress disorder is exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury or sexual violation. Such exposure can arise when a law enforcement professional: (a) directly experiences

the traumatic event; (b) witnesses the traumatic event in person; (c) learns that the traumatic event occurred to a close family member or friend such as another law enforcement professional; or (d) experiences first-hand repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of the traumatic event (not through media, pictures, television or movies unless work-related) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). After trauma exposure, the law enforcement professional may experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress such as: (a) intrusive thoughts (e.g., unwanted memories, nightmares, flashbacks, emotional distress, physical reactivity); (b) avoidance of trauma-related stimuli, trauma-related thoughts or feelings, and trauma reminders; (c) negative changes in mood and cognitions (e.g., inability to recall important details of the trauma, entrenched negative thinking, blaming self or other, negative affect, diminished interest in activities, isolation, difficulty experiencing positive affect); and (d) trauma-related arousal and reactivity (e.g., irritability, aggression, risky or destructive behavior, hypervigilance, heightened startle response, difficulty concentrating, and difficulty sleeping) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

The lingering effects of work-related traumatic stress often does not go away before the end of a law enforcement professional's shift. Therefore, they bring symptoms associated with the work-related trauma into their home lives and intimate relationships. In accordance, exposure to work-related traumatic events or stressors can have an impact not only on the individual law enforcement professional (as evidenced by symptoms of post-traumatic stress), but also on their family relationships, particularly the couple's relationship (Kirschman, 1997). Multiple areas within the couple relationship can be influenced when one or both members of the couple have endured a traumatic experience including alterations in relationship roles, issues with boundaries, intimacy problems, and changes in communication (Henry et al., 2011). Research of those in

other similar high-stress professions (e.g., paramedics and firefighters) suggests that spouses and family members of these professionals can experience distress following a work-related traumatic event, regardless of whether the professional shares details of the event (Regher, Dimitropoulos, Bright, Georgie, & Henderson, 2005; Regehr, 2005). Furthermore, partners or spouses of other first-responder professionals have been known to develop a unique awareness to the professional's mood and attempt to manage their mood to avoid conflict (Regher, Dimitropoulos, Bright, Georgie, & Henderson, 2005; Regehr, 2005).

Research specifically related to law enforcement couples has found that when a law enforcement professional carries stress home, it often has a direct impact on their interactions with their spouse (Roberts & Levenson, 2001). Law enforcement partners and spouses absorb much of the law enforcement professional's work-related stress (Roberts & Levenson, 2001) and can also experience symptoms of traumatization or secondary traumatic stress (Landers et al., 2019; Meffert et al., 2014). In some law enforcement families, spouses of the law enforcement professional take on additional responsibilities in the aftermath of trauma exposure in an effort to manage the family's wellbeing, adopting a similar mentality to the law enforcement professional aiming to be strong and honor the law enforcement culture. Adopting this mentality can often leave less space for law enforcement couples to openly share their struggles following work-related trauma exposure (Johnson, Todd, & Subramanian, 2005). Furthermore, the pile-up of work-related traumatic stress for law enforcement couples can lead to struggles with infidelity, codependency, alcoholism, and divorce (Kirschman, 1997).

While couple and family relationships can experience detrimental impacts from work-related traumatic stress, these relationships are also seen as important sources of support, which act to mediate or buffer against work-related traumatic stress responses in other similar high-

stress, first-responder professions (Regehr, 2005; Regher, Dimitropoulos, Bright, Georgie, & Henderson, 2005; Regher, Hemsworth, & Hill, 2001). Research specifically focused on work-related traumatic stress among law enforcement professionals suggests that the provision of social support by partners and spouses is helpful in counteracting the work-related traumatic stress experienced by law enforcement professionals (Craun, Bourke, Bierie, & Williams, 2014; Landers et al., 2019). Such support varies from relationship to relationship, but for law enforcement couples this support might involve creating space for and listening to the law enforcement professional's recall or processing of the traumatic event, as well as being patient and accommodating to their need for space (and sometimes distance) following traumatic stress exposure (Landers et al., 2019; Todd, & Subramanian, 2005). While adjustments in communication and spousal support seem to reduce the detrimental impact of trauma, more research is needed to illuminate the types of coping that best serve law enforcement couples.

### **Significance**

The majority of research on the impact of work-related traumatic stress on first-responders focuses on either the first-responder (e.g., Craun, Bourke, Bierie, & Williams, 2014; Follette, Polusny, & Milbeck, 1994; Hartley et al., 2013; Rees & Smith, 2008; Regehr, Hemsworth, & Hill, 2001) or their partner (e.g., Alexander & Walker, 1996; Landers et al., 2019; Maynard, Maynard, McCubbin & Shao, 1980; Regehr, 2005; Regher et al., 2005; Regher, Hemsworth, & Hill, 2001). The few studies that have explored the impact of traumatic stress on law enforcement couples collected data from only one member of the couple (see Alexander & Walker 1996; Landers et al., 2019; Maynard, Maynard, Mccubbin & Shao, 1980). Work-related traumatic stress not only impacts the individual (e.g., the law enforcement professional, the partner or spouse); work-related traumatic stress also impacts the couple dyad. In particular,

traumatic stress can have influence over a variety of areas within a couple dyad including relationship roles (Henry et al., 2011), feelings of connection (Figley & Figley, 2009), interactional patterns (Johnson, Todd, and Subramanian, 2005), conflict management (Maynard, Maynard, Mccubbin & Shao, 1980), and coping mechanisms (Maynard, Maynard, Mccubbin & Shao, 1980).

Previous qualitative research has yet to use dyadic data to explore the impact of work-related traumatic stress on law enforcement couples. With more insight into the impact of work-related traumatic stress on law enforcement couples, marriage and family therapists will be able to better assess for the impact of trauma on couple relationships and be better equipped to normalize the potentially detrimental impact of work-related traumatic stress. This study sought to illuminate the couple interactions that could potentially impact important facets of the couple relationship for law enforcement couples. The study provides essential information into the lived experiences of law enforcement couples, offers suggestions to develop targeted prevention and intervention efforts within the law enforcement community to buffer against the detrimental impacts of work-related traumatic stress.

### **Rationale**

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of the impact of work-related traumatic stress on law enforcement couples from a dyadic perspective. Dyadic interviews were used to invite participants to interact with one another throughout the interview and to encourage participants to build off of one another's ideas (Tkachuck, Russell-Mayhew, Kassan, & Dimitropoulos, 2019). Throughout the dyadic interview process, the researchers of this study aimed to illuminate the complex, reciprocal and relational accounts of each couples' shared experience of how work-related traumatic stress had impacts on their relationship. Using a

dyadic approach enabled the researchers to witness the similarities and differences in each member of the couple's experiences, highlighting points of divergence and convergence related to their shared experiences (Antoine, Flinois, Doba, Nandrino, Dodin, & Hendrick, 2018).

Along with dyadic interviews, this study utilized a transcendental phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994) to capture the essence of law enforcement couple's experiences of work-related traumatic stress. Transcendental phenomenology allowed the researchers to arrive at a "textual-structural synthesis of meanings and essences of the phenomenon" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 14). The essence of the law enforcement couple's experience was descriptive in nature – encompassing "what" the couples have experienced and "how" they experienced it (Creswell, 2013). Transcendental phenomenology was chosen due to its emphasis on the idea that an individual or couple's reality of a phenomenon is largely dependent upon the individual or couple themselves. In other words, this approach required that the researchers recognize each member of the couple and the couple dyad as experiencing their own realities of the experience of the impact of work-related traumatic stress (Moustakas, 1994).

The phenomenon of work-related traumatic stress was approached during each interview with a "wide open sense" wherein the researchers consciously set aside their own judgments and previous knowledge of the phenomena (Moustakas, 1994, p. 8). Due to deeply personal and sensitive nature of the lived experience of work-related traumatic stress for law enforcement couples, the researchers used a phenomenological approach to create space for both members of the law enforcement couple to share their personal stories, while the researchers listened with respect and in honor of their service. Rich descriptions of the couple's shared, lived experiences helped the researchers to fill the gap of knowledge related to the impact of work-related traumatic stress on law enforcement couples. Knowledge of the impact of work-related traumatic

stress on law enforcement couple's relational stability and satisfaction, as well as strengths and coping patterns, served inform the provision of marriage and family therapy services to law enforcement couples.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Law enforcement professionals often experience work-related traumatic events while on the job. Traumatic stress often follows exposure to distressing events involving a perceived threat, witnessing a traumatic event in person, or being exposed to details of child or elder abuse. Secondary traumatic stress explains the emotions and behaviors that result when a partner or spouse provides support for their significant other who has experienced first-hand traumatic stress (Figley, 1995). In such instances, secondary traumatic stress is the natural consequence of hearing or learning about a traumatic experience that the law enforcement professional endured (Figley, 1995). Secondary traumatic stress theory has been applied to partners of trauma survivors (Henry et al., 2011), specifically spouses of law enforcement (Landers et al., 2019). In secondary traumatic stress theory, it is assumed that stress symptoms experienced by the law enforcement professional can be communicated to the partner or spouse, resulting in the partner or spouse experiencing stress symptoms themselves (Figley, 1995). These effects on the partner or spouse of the law enforcement professional are considered secondary, because the partner or spouse was not directly exposed to the trauma (Henry et al., 2011). As applied to this study, secondary traumatic stress theory suggests that when a law enforcement professional has experienced work-related traumatic stress, the law enforcement professional's spouse or partner will likely experience symptoms of secondary traumatic stress as a result of wanting to help and support the law enforcement professional. This means that both members of the couple dyad experience symptoms associated with work-related traumatic stress.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of the impact of work-related traumatic stress on the law enforcement couple dyad. To-date research has focused primarily on the impact of trauma on law enforcement professionals and their partners or spouses. Few studies explore the impact of work-related traumatic stress on the law enforcement couples using dyadic data. This study aimed to draw attention to the experiences of the impact of work-related traumatic stress on law enforcement couples. The phenomenon of work-related traumatic stress was broadly and generally defined as exposure to traumatic events such as tragic car incidents, being involved in a shooting, answering a child-related call, or any other work-related event that the law enforcement professional experienced as traumatic. The following research question guided this study: What is your lived experience as a couple of the impact of work-related traumatic stress on your relationship as a couple?



## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

Overall, there is a scarcity of literature related to law enforcement couples. The majority of the literature related to the stressful nature of law enforcement is focused solely on experiences and symptoms of the law enforcement professional (Ansel, 2000; Craun, Courke, Bierie & Williams, 2014; Follette, Polusny, & Milbeck, 1994; Gershon, Barocas, & Canton, 2009; Hartley et al., 2013; Krause, 2009; Rees & Smith, 2008). Far fewer studies focus on partners and spouses of law enforcement professionals (Landers et al., 2019; Maynard, Maynard, & McCubbin, 1980; Meffert et al., 2014) and even less delve into the experiences of law enforcement couples (Roberts & Levenson, 2001). To our knowledge, no qualitative research has been conducted to-date on law enforcement couples using dyadic data. In this literature review, current literature is synthesized related to: (a) traumatic stress in law enforcement professionals; (b) cultural characteristics of the law enforcement profession; (c) the impact of traumatic stress on law enforcement partners and spouses; and (d) the impact of traumatic stress on law enforcement couples.

### Traumatic Stress in Law Enforcement Professionals

Law enforcement is recognized as a highly stressful profession (Woody, 2006). Law enforcement professionals recognize and accept the risk for work-related traumatic events as an unavoidable stressor in their commitment “to serve and protect” (Digliani, 2012). In essence, stress is commonplace for most law enforcement professionals. Law enforcement professionals experience work-related stressors that are unique to the job, and as such many law enforcement professionals report experiencing some sort of sad, depressing, critical, or traumatic incident while on the job (Gershon et al., 2009; Hartley et al., 2013). Other examples of these types

critical or traumatic events might include responding to fatal accidents, arriving at a scene where someone has committed suicide, investigating acts of child abuse, attending a police funeral (Gershon et al., 2009), using deadly force, witnessing a suicide, suicide by cop, and being shot and/or shot at (Digliani, 2012).

Studies have found that law enforcement professionals report experiencing or perceiving their work as stressful or straining (Ansel, 2000; Roberts & Levenson, 2001; Gershon et al., 2009). It is not uncommon for law enforcement professionals to display symptoms of post-traumatic stress following exposure to traumatic, work-related events (Gershon, Barocas, & Canton, 2009; Hartley et al., 2013). According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), these symptoms might include re-experiencing the event, avoiding situations that could bring back memories of the event, difficulty sleeping, and trouble concentrating due to hyperarousal (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). This is congruent with research findings that law enforcement professionals are more likely to report symptoms of mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, dissociation, and personal and psychological distress (Follette, Polusny, & Milbeck, 1994), which are likely related to the unavoidable, demanding high-stress nature of the job.

Researchers have suggested that the poor health outcomes of law enforcement professionals may be a result of a lack of coping mechanisms following exposure to stress in the line duty (Gershon et al., 2009). These issues are only further confounded by the decreased likelihood at which law enforcement professionals seek therapy (Follette, Polusny, & Milbeck, 1994). While therapy may serve as a resource to alleviate the detrimental impact of work-related stress, law enforcement professionals are unlikely to seek services. Witnessing traumatic events can be particularly difficult for law enforcement professionals, as many might lack the necessary

training and resources needed to handle the aftermath of work-related traumatic stress (Hartley et al., 2013). For example, law enforcement professionals may lack the time and space needed to process traumatic events, as many find that they are required to move directly to subsequent tasks of the job (Rees & Smith, 2008).

### **Cultural Characteristics of the Law Enforcement Profession**

The decreased likelihood of law enforcement professionals seeking professional help may be, at least in part, a result of the widespread perspective that those outside of the law enforcement community cannot be trusted (Wester & Lyubelsky, 2005). The term “law enforcement culture” refers to a set of values, attitudes, and norms that are commonly shared among law enforcement professionals (Paoline, Myers, & Worden, 2000), which fosters a strong bond and fierce loyalty between law enforcement professionals (Miller, 2007). Secrecy is highly regarded and even expected in law enforcement culture and is viewed as an exhibit of police solidarity (Johnson, Todd, & Subramanian 2005). Law enforcement professionals are often inclined to silence their emotional responses to stressful or dangerous events due to fear of seeming incompetent on the job (Davidson & Moss, 2008). Law enforcement professionals might be able to acknowledge that expressing difficult emotions is a healthy outlet for emotional health yet find it difficult to do so for themselves due to the expectations of law enforcement culture (Howard, Tuffin, & Stephens, 2000).

Law enforcement culture fosters a number of behavioral traits such as control, dominance, authority, and lack of sentimentality (Miller, 2007) as part of the duty to serve. While these traits of law enforcement culture can be quite useful in facets of effective law enforcement, they naturally conflict with more cooperative, relationship-oriented attitudes that are usually considered important in marriage and family life. That is, the very protectiveness that

serves them well at work is less effective in their personal, particularly romantic, relationships. It is not uncommon for law enforcement professionals to bring characteristics of law enforcement culture and the nature of police work into their family lives. For example, they may be more likely to display overprotectiveness, suspiciousness, and hypervigilance in their familial relationships (Miller, 2007). Since it is not unfathomable that law enforcement professionals may encounter difficulty in seeking help “outside the culture,” it is imperative to address this gap in literature in order to provide the best possible services to law enforcement couples and families.

### **Impact of Traumatic Stress on Law Enforcement Partners and Spouses**

Partners and spouses of law enforcement are regarded as part of the greater “law enforcement family.” Many who “marry into” law enforcement culture adopt a similar mentality of remaining strong and honoring the law enforcement culture (Johnson, Todd, & Subramanian, 2005, p. 4). In particular, many partners and spouses of law enforcement describe experiencing the same fierce loyalty to the profession as the law enforcement professional (Roberts & Levenson, 2001). Through their supportive role, law enforcement partners and spouses are particularly vulnerable to stress, as they absorb a significant amount of the law enforcement professional’s work-related stress (Roberts & Levenson, 2001). Furthermore, partners and spouses of law enforcement can experience symptoms of secondary traumatic stress (Henry et. al, 2011; Landers et al., 2019; Meffert et. al, 2014), which can leave both members of the couple with less space to be vulnerable following trauma exposure. While providing therapy services to each individual (i.e., law enforcement professional and partner or spouse) might be an important modality of treatment, marriage and family therapists should also consider working with the couple dyad. Providing therapy to law enforcement couples could lead to potential benefits

within the couple and family subsystems, improving the law enforcement family's overall functioning.

### **Impact of Traumatic Stress on the Couple's Relationship**

When a law enforcement professional carries work-related stress into their family life, it often has a direct impact on their interactions with their spouse (Robert & Levenson, 2001). On days when a law enforcement professional reports higher levels of work-related stress, both the law enforcement professional and their spouse display greater levels of arousal during their interactions (Robert & Levenson, 2001). Law enforcement couples also report feeling less positive affect (associated with more enjoyable, satisfying interactions) during high-stress work days of the law enforcement professional (Robert & Levenson, 2001). Some law enforcement spouses can, at times, become frustrated with the lack of communication within their relationships. Such frustration only adds to the stress of dealing with law enforcement work-related trauma when it arises (Brodie & Eppler, 2012). It is not surprising that, considering the high levels of stress that law enforcement professionals encounter during the course of their work, law enforcement couples are at an increased risk for negative couple coping patterns. For example, law enforcement couples experiences higher rates of law enforcement perpetrated domestic violence (Mennicke & Ropes, 2016) and there is a higher risk of violence (e.g., authoritarianism, alcohol abuse, spousal violence) in police families (Johnson, Todd, & Subramanian, 2005).

A recent study found that coping tactics involving the social support of loved ones (e.g., spouses and partners) help buffer work-related traumatic stress for law enforcement professionals (Craun, Bourke, Bierie, & Williams, 2014). Partners of those who have experienced trauma might discover that their role in the relationship is shaped by the support that

they provide to their partner following a traumatic experience (Henry et. al, 2011). Since partners and spouses of law enforcement professionals also experience high degrees of stress related to the law enforcement profession, negative coping patterns are likely to arise (Roberts & Levenson, 2001). As previously mentioned, literature suggests that partners and spouses of law enforcement tend to take on the tough mentality mirroring that of the law enforcement professional (Johnson, Todd & Subramanian, 2005). While being “tough” may serve law enforcement couples well in dealing with the day-to-day difficulties of the law enforcement profession, such traits may also pose problematic for healthy couple functioning including closeness and intimacy.

The small amount of research that exists on law enforcement couples describes the importance of resources in relational coping around the unique stressors of the law enforcement profession (Brodie & Eppler, 2012). Seeing that partners of law enforcement professionals play a supportive role following work-related traumatic stress exposure (Henry et al., 2001), further exploration of their relational experiences could lead to insight on which relationship characteristics are helpful, as well as those that could be improved. Due to the stressful nature of the law enforcement profession, further research is needed to explore the mechanisms and roles that the couple’s relationship plays in relation to work-related traumatic stress. Knowledge related the role that the couple relationship plays in the impact of work-related traumatic stress in law enforcement couples could assist marriage and family therapists in their work with law enforcement couples, normalize the potential impacts of work-related traumatic stress within the law enforcement community, and inform future research on law enforcement couples and families.

## **CHAPTER III: METHOD**

### **Study Design**

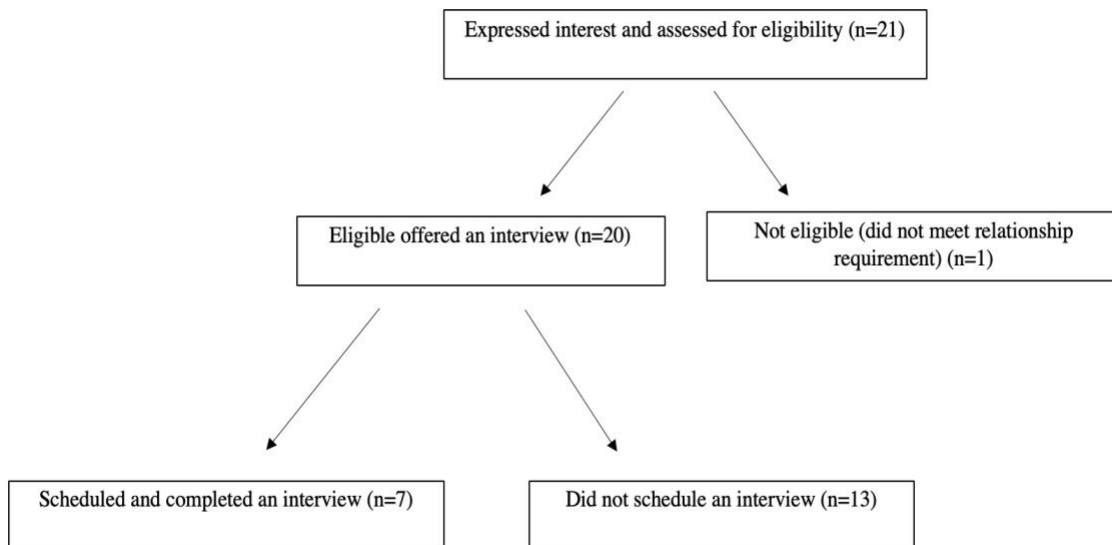
Dyadic data were collected using a transcendental phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of law enforcement couples who have been exposed to work-related traumatic stress. Interviews were conducted to acquire an in-depth description (Kyale, 2008) from couples while remaining sensitive to the subject of work-related traumatic stress. Interviews allowed for increased opportunities for participants to provide full, rich responses (Creswell, 2013). The exploratory nature of this research initiative led to the selection of a transcendental phenomenological design. Transcendental phenomenology focuses on creating both textural (i.e., what the participants experienced), as well as structural (i.e., how they experienced it) descriptions of the participants' experiences, which in this study were couples (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). In order to minimize the possibility of interpretations of the participant's experiences, the researchers set aside their own experiences with law enforcement couples and families, and placed focus onto acquiring a rich description of the law enforcement couple's experiences (Creswell, 2013). Dyadic data were utilized in an attempt to capture the essence of the couple dyad's shared experience, yielding a more holistic account of the law enforcement couple's lived experiences surrounding work-related traumatic stress (Morgan, 2010). The goal set by researchers was to illuminate the couple's lived experiences and allow their descriptions and ascribed meanings to be brought forward.

### **Sampling and Recruitment**

Recruitment emails (See Appendix A and Appendix B) were sent to a number of listservs and online support groups including: International Association of Police Chiefs, National Sherriff's Association, National Police Wives Association, Police Wives of America, Wives of

Police Officers Community Group, and The Thin Blue Line Foundation. Recruitment materials (see Appendix C) were shared via law enforcement and first responder Facebook groups (e.g., PTSD in Paramedics, EMTs, First Responders) and a listserv associated with Virginia Tech's marriage and family therapy program. Each participating couple was offered the opportunity to enter a raffle for one of two \$50 gift cards. The raffle was explained to them as part of the consent form and the couple indicated interest to be entered into the raffle on the informed consent form (See Appendix E). 21 interested participants contacted the co-investigator (Avery Campbell) via email or phone. The co-investigator screened all prospective participants via phone or email using a screening guide (See Appendix D) based upon the inclusion criteria. One prospective participant was not eligible because they did not meet the requirement of being in an active relationship of at least two years. Twenty of the interested couples were screened as eligible and offered an interview date. Seven couples scheduled and completed interviews. The remaining thirteen couples failed to schedule interviews.

**Figure 1. Consort Diagram**





***Inclusion Criteria***

Law enforcement professionals were eligible to participate if they met the following inclusion criteria: (1) were an active or retired law enforcement professional (of any rank); (2) had at least two years of active duty experience at the time of the interview; (3) had experienced at least one incident that they would consider to be a work-related traumatic event; (4) were in an intimate partner relationship for at least one year; (5) were at least 18 years old; (6) were English speaking; (7) consented to be interviewed as a couple; and (8) consented for the interview to be audio recorded.

Spouses of law enforcement professionals were eligible to participate if they met the following inclusion criteria: (1) were partnered with an active or retired law enforcement professional for at least one year; (2) were partnered with an active or retired law enforcement professional with at least two years of active duty experience; (3) were partnered a law enforcement professional who has experienced at least one incident that they would consider to be a work-related traumatic event; (4) were at least 18 years old; (4) were English speaking; (5) consented to be interviewed as a couple; and (6) consented for the interview to be audio recorded.

***Sample Characteristics***

Figure 1 displays the recruitment and eligibility process that led to the final sample. The final sample included seven couple dyads for a total of fourteen participants. Six couples consisted of a law enforcement professional partnered with a non-law enforcement professional spouse, and one couple was a dual law enforcement couple (both members of the couple were a law enforcement professional). All couples were in heterosexual relationships. Law enforcement participants ranged in age from 27 to 52 years ( $M = 39.25$ ,  $SD = 8.33$ ) and spouses ranged in age

from 25 to 54 years ( $M = 36.33$ ,  $SD = 9.93$ ). All law enforcement participants were White with the exception of one law enforcement professional who identified as White and Hispanic. All spouses in the study were White with the exception of one spouse who identified as Bi-racial (Asian and White).

The majority of law enforcement professionals worked full-time (87.50%) as did their spouses (83.33%), who were employed in a variety of professions including marketing, consulting, finance, nonprofit fundraising, Medicaid representative, marriage and family therapist. The majority of the participants had completed at least some college (85.71%); five participants (35.71%) held a master's degree or higher. The majority of couples (71.43%) had a household income of \$100,000 or more. The majority of law enforcement professionals worked in local positions (62.50%) with the average length of service being over 10 years ( $M = 11.07$ ,  $SD = 5.43$ ). The majority of couples lived and worked in the southeast region of the United States with the exception of one couple residing on the west coast. Table 1 provides the demographics for the total sample including individual and couple characteristics.

### **Procedures**

After receiving approval from the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (IRB #19-462), if eligibility criteria were met, the co-investigator scheduled a time to conduct a 90 to 120-minute in-person or phone interview provided that the couple remained interested in participating. The researchers scheduled the interview at a date and time convenient to the couple.

### ***Informed Consent***

A copy of the written consent form was provided in person or electronically to each dyad prior to the interview. The consent form was reviewed verbally prior to the onset of the

interview. Each dyad received ample time to review the consent form and ask questions. Couples interviewed in person provided written consent (See Appendix E), whereas couples interviewed by phone provided verbal consent (See Appendix F). The consent form explained that the researchers were interested in understanding the couple's experience of the impact of work-related traumatic stress on the couple's relationship. Informed consent explicitly stated that the research process was voluntary and that the couple could opt to terminate the interview at any time without penalty. Couples were provided with mental health referrals and resources (See Appendix G) following each interview. Couples were reminded during the interview that they could choose to cease the interview at any time if the interview became too emotionally distressing

### ***In-person and Telephone Interviews***

Six out of seven couple interviews were conducted over the phone. One couple was interviewed in person in the couple's home. Phone interviews were captured using the speaker phone option and a sensitive audio recording device. Couples were interviewed out of the earshot of others unless they consented to be heard by others (such as when the interview occurred in the family home). The couple's interview audio files and transcripts were treated as confidential and only shared with the research team.

### ***Data Storage and Transcription***

All interviews were conducted and audio-recorded by the same researcher (co-investigator: Avery Campbell) in order to ensure consistency. The interviews were audio-recorded on SONY voice recorders. The audio recordings were stored on memory cards in confidential possession of the co-investigator (Avery Campbell) under double lock-and-key in a secure office at Virginia Tech. Upon completion of each interview, the audio recording was

transferred from a memory card to be stored on the secure server of principal investigator (Dr. Ashley Landers) at Virginia Tech. The audio files were stored in a private password protected folder on the server which had access restricted solely to the research team. In order to allot additional time to the coding process, a professional transcriptionist was used who was required to sign a confidentiality agreement (see Appendix H). Word-for-word transcription of the audio recordings were conducted. Once transcribed, the interview transcripts were de-identified and coded by the co-investigator (Avery Campbell).

### **Measures**

In-depth semi-structured dyadic interviews were conducted with seven couples who experienced the phenomenon of work-related traumatic stress exposure (Creswell, 2013). During the interview, both members of the couple were encouraged to interact with one another, and build on each other's ideas. The researcher followed a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix J), which included open-ended questions and general prompts for the couple to discuss. Given that dyadic interviews tend to yield a more holistic account of the couple's shared experience (Morgan, 2010), the researchers asked follow-up questions in order to gain further insight into the couple's experience of the impact of work-related traumatic stress on their relationship. The aim was to reach a point of saturation in each interview, as well as with the data collected as a whole (Creswell, 2013). Saturation was defined as reaching the point in data collection in which "no additional data" were found (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 61). The researchers conducted additional interviews until saturation was reached.

Each interview began with verbally obtaining demographic information from both members of the couple (e.g., age, gender, race, ethnicity, education, religious beliefs, employment, job title/rank, years in service; see Appendix J). The researcher then began with the

grand tour question of the interview process: What is your lived experience as a couple of the impact of work-related traumatic stress on your relationship? (See Appendix I). Follow up questions were asked based upon the participants' responses in order to create the richest description possible.

Following the grand tour question, the couple was asked to reflect on how the law enforcement professional's exposure to work-related traumatic stress impacts various aspects of the relationship including: communication, quality time, financial management, conflict, intimacy, children/parenting, relationships with friends/relatives, role relationship, spiritual beliefs, and coping skills (see Appendix I). These questions allowed the researcher to gain insight into the how law enforcement couples experience work-related traumatic stress, how it influenced various aspects of their relationship, and how they cope as a couple.

### ***Epoche and Data Collection***

The researcher utilized Moustakas' (1994) approach to data collection, which began with *epoche* or setting aside the researcher's prejudgments. *Epoche* is an important aspect of transcendental phenomenology throughout the entirety of the research process, as it ensures that the data collection and analysis are done "freshly, as if for the first time" for each interview or instance of coding (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34). The researcher took time to memo prior to and after each interview, reflecting upon potential biases and personal experiences that could or did arise during the interview process. To increase trustworthiness, the co-investigator conducted each interview, ensuring a consistent understanding of the interviewee. This researcher also used an audit trail to continuously document their thinking process during data collection. The co-investigator completed the coding process. The principal and co-investigator reviewed the coding together and discussed discrepancies until they were agreed upon.

## Data Analysis

Transcripts of the interviews were compared against the audio-recordings by the co-investigator to ensure accuracy before data analysis. Each interview transcript was read in its entirety prior to coding (Moustakas, 1994). Horizontalization was utilized, wherein significant statements that provided rich information about the shared experience were identified (i.e., selected in text regardless of where the sentence began or ended). Significant statements were carefully separated and any irrelevant, repetitive or overlapping statements were removed. The remaining statements were then clustered into themes and were used to create descriptions of *what* the couple's experienced, as well as *how* it was experienced (Creswell, 2013). Finally, the researcher synthesized these themes into rich descriptions of the experiences of the couple, capturing the essence, or meaning, that law enforcement couples have of the impact of work-related trauma on their couple's relationship (Creswell, 2013).

Moustakas' (1994) coding procedures were adapted to ensure that the relational perspective of the shared experience in the dyadic data was captured. Dyadic coding considerations were applied to the transcendental phenomenological coding process as outlined by Tkachuk, Russell-Mayhew, Kassan, and Dimitropoulos (2019). First, the researchers noted areas of convergence or agreement and divergence or disagreement between the couple's shared experience of the phenomena. Examining areas of convergence and divergence added depth and illuminated the complexity of the shared experience. It also ensured a more holistic perspective understanding was attained regarding the couple's experience of the impact of work-related traumatic stress on their relationship. Second, in order to reduce the risk of one member of the couple overshadowing the other in the analyses and findings, significant statements were labeled by speaker, allowing the researchers to track the frequency and type of significant statements that

arose from each member of the dyad. In cases where significant statements were predominantly from one speaker within the couple dyad, the researchers purposely included significant statements from the less dominant speaker in order to ensure an equal representation of both of the participants' perspectives. In cases where there was a question, topic, or issue that only one member of the dyad addressed during the interview, these significant statements were labeled as unique by noting that the other partner failed to comment.

### ***Trustworthiness and Self of the Researcher***

It is important to note that the co-investigator (Avery Campbell) grew up in a law enforcement family and has close relationships with members of the law enforcement community. The researchers felt that it was essential to note this experience, as it was at the forefront of the bracketing process practiced throughout this study. In an effort to ensure validity of the data within the study, the co-investigator set aside her own personal experiences and biases continuously throughout the research process, as well as during each step of the data analysis process. The co-investigator practiced Moustakas' (1994) teaching of epoche, bracketing, and intentionality. With the intention of ensuring effective bracketing, the co-investigator journaled about her personal experiences before and after each interview. These journals or memos served to record her reflections throughout the analysis process.

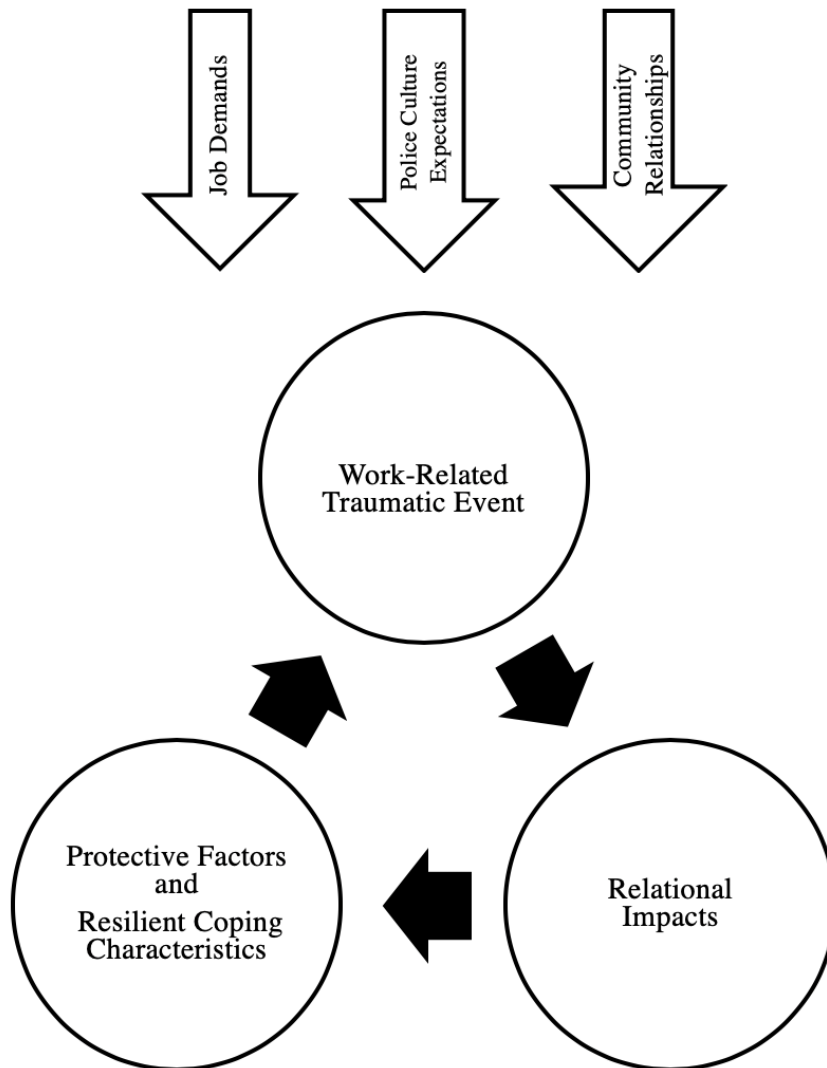
Alongside bracketing efforts, the primary investigator took the role of an external auditor, as she was not involved in conducting the interviews or initial coding procedures (Creswell, 2013). Furthermore, the primary investigator's perspective outside of the law enforcement community added to the validity in monitoring the transformation of meaning units into the essence of participating partners' experiences. Both researchers (co-investigator and principal investigator) engaged in negative or deviant case analysis, discussing elements of the data that

did not support or appeared to contradict emerging patterns. Saturation was reached as the researchers found no additional data that lead to new codes or themes (Creswell, 2013), which enabled a rich, thick description (i.e., describing the phenomenon in sufficient detail, enough to which the conclusions are transferable to other times, settings, situations, and people) (Creswell, 2013).



## CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

Three themes emerged within the data that captured the essence of law enforcement couple experiences: (1) the stressful nature of the law enforcement profession, (2) the impact of work-related traumatic stress on the couple's relationship, and (3) protective factors and resilient coping characteristics. Couples described the stressful nature of the law enforcement profession including job demands, expectations of police culture, tense community relationships, and exposure to work-related traumatic events. The impact of work-related traumatic stress on the couple's relationship included tension in areas of communication, parenting and discipline, quality time, and commitment to the relationship and law enforcement profession. Resilient couple characteristics included sharing with other law enforcement couples, prioritizing time as a couple, and attending couple's therapy. Resilient couple characteristics enabled couples to create meaning out of their experiences with work-related traumatic stress which, in turn, strengthened their relationship after offsetting their experiences of work-related stress. Themes and associated codes are described below along with illustrative dyadic quotes which highlight areas of convergence and divergence within the couple's experience. The following figure (Figure 2) is meant to capture the essence of the law enforcement couple experience; the essence encapsulates *what* the couples experienced *how* they experienced the impact of work-related traumatic stress on their relationship.

**Composite Description of the Essence****Figure 2. Work-Related Traumatic Stress Response Cycle**

The essence of the law enforcement couple experience of work-related traumatic stress is captured in Figure 2. This relationship response cycle was developed after all data analysis was completed and is meant to portray the repeated cycle that law enforcement couples in this study experienced when they were exposed to work-related traumatic events. Arrows overhead the process portray work-related stress that is ongoing (i.e., stress that is not directly related to a

work-related traumatic event) including job demands, expectations of police culture, and community relationships that contribute to the stressful nature of work-related traumatic events. These factors inform the couple's response to work-related traumatic events, the specific impact on the couple relationship, and their ability to engage in resilient coping characteristics.

A work-related traumatic event was defined as an event that one or both members of the law enforcement couple identified as having a profound emotional or psychological impact. Both physically threatening work-related traumatic events (e.g., law enforcement professional being shot at or becoming injured from a physical altercation) and emotionally or psychologically impactful work-related traumatic events (e.g., the death of a fellow law enforcement professional, the law enforcement professional witnessing a suicide) had an impact on the couple relationship. Individual experiences of post-traumatic stress symptoms were determined by the type of work-related traumatic event (e.g., physical or psychological).

Following the work-related traumatic event, couples experienced the impact of trauma in areas of communication, parenting, quality time, and commitment. While relational impacts were an inevitable result of work-related traumatic stress, couples in this study described how work-related traumatic events activated resilient coping characteristics centered around intentionally processing the emotional distress of the law enforcement profession. Couples processing also occurred within other supportive relationships (e.g., sharing with other law enforcement couples, seeking couples' therapy and/or as an individual, engaging in spiritual practices). Law enforcement couples reported that they were more likely to these activate resilient coping characteristics following work-related traumatic events.

**Theme One: The Stressful Nature of the Law Enforcement Profession**

Each couple described aspects of the law enforcement profession that contributed to the overarching experience of work-related stress within their relationships. Descriptions of work-related stress centered around job demands, expectations of police culture, and community relationships. The couples described how these overarching elements of work-related stress contributed to their experience of work-related traumatic events and the impacts that followed. Work-related traumatic events had differing impacts on the law enforcement professional and spouse based on the what kind of threat the law enforcement was placed in. Work-related traumatic events were distinctive in the level of impact on each member of the couple, separated by the nature of the threat; the law enforcement professional was placed in direct, physical danger (e.g., a shooting or a physical attack) and events in which the law enforcement professional was not necessarily placed in direct physical danger, posing a more indirect threat to the law enforcement professional (e.g., witnessing a suicide or investigating a mass shooting).

***Code: Job Demands***

Both law enforcement professionals and their spouses expressed that the job demands involved in the law enforcement professional's profession contributed to the stress they experience within their relationship. Law enforcement professionals spoke to the myriad of duties that they were expected to complete, which contributed to the personal impacts of work-related traumatic events.

**LEP5:** Law enforcement is stressful enough. You've got deadlines; you've got these cases to work. Especially for me, I've got – being a supervisor, being the chief investigator of [county] everything, every case that happens in [county] comes across my desk.... So, the stresses of picking that [case] up, and the stresses of doing this, and

interviewing these people, and tracking them down, and getting warrants, and making the final arrest, and court, and depositions... that's stressful in itself.

One law enforcement professional described when he experienced a higher amount of emotional distress and irritability after a series of suicides within his community: **LEP4** stated, “But I think I was just extremely irritable because here I am going from suicide, to suicide, to suicide, while also going, and helping, and train other people, and work with them, and still makes proactive arrests.” Spouses agreed that the workload associated with the law enforcement were stressful in nature, and couples noted that the expectations within the law enforcement profession is to carry on.

***Code: Expectations of Police Culture***

All law enforcement professionals and their spouses described the stress associated with expectations of police culture. In accordance with the culture, law enforcement professionals are expected to set aside or ignore their emotional reactions in order to continue to do the job. One law enforcement professional expressed how the expectation to continue working without hesitation is a stress within itself. **LEP5** said, “Are there some cases that I work that touch me? Absolutely. But I can't show that because I have a job to do. So, that's stress in itself.”

Law enforcement professionals acknowledged they lacked training on how to emotionally process work-related traumatic events, touching on how expectations of police culture can hinder their emotional health. **LEP7** stated, “They don't teach us in law enforcement how to process the grief, how to process the trauma of what we have to do in our job.”

**LEP7:** We get up the next day, we go to work, and we pretend like it never happened.

You can't pretend like you just didn't shoot somebody. You can't pretend like you didn't realize that your life was almost over.

**Spouse7:** Especially, for that situation [physical attack on LEP] that I talked about, I mean, that was his [LEP who experienced the event] tipping point. It was something major. And I think at that time he knew it was something major, but he could never verbalize that. He would just shut down and pretend like nothing was ever wrong.

One spouse expressed acknowledged that the expectations of the job do not cease in the face of repeated exposure to work-related traumatic events.

**Spouse6:** Those emotions of like, they don't know what they're feeling are – don't feel that they need to process, or don't even know how. They kind of get stuck in there, almost like any trauma. However, they have to keep exposing themselves to it. They have to keep going to work.

Spouses expressed that they are also expected to adopt a similar mentality to keep going when the law enforcement professional is experiencing a high amount of work-related stress.

**Spouse3:** I think there was a lot of times where I would have to hamper down my worrying and my anxiety because it was like that was the game that we were playing. We were just gonna act like there was no danger.

Another law enforcement professional acknowledged their spouse's perspective that they too were expected to develop a "thick skin." **LEP4** stated, "So, that's where it's like, as the spouse, your skin just has to keep getting thicker because who else is gonna feel the brunt of it?"

***Code: Community Relationships***

It is important to note that law enforcement professionals and their spouses experienced work-related traumatic stress within a community context. Not only did they serve their communities, they lived and raised their families within them. Couples described what it was like to live within a community with the uniquely personal knowledge of the incidents that happen in

their own neighborhoods. Furthermore, law enforcement professionals and their spouses described how today's sociopolitical climate and the dichotomy of *good cop/bad cop* contributed to work-related stress. One law enforcement professional touched on their responsibility to provide answers to the community following a work-related traumatic event, which can involve providing answers as a professional, and as a member of the community. **LEP5** said, "And we made a spectacle out of the [suicide], and command staff was out there, all the people in the community where all the friends live there, so everyone's calling me, and this and that." Another law enforcement professional commented on how, at times, they felt the need to withhold particular details of work work-related events in an effort to protect their family from details of work-related traumatic events involving people with whom his children were personally connected.

**LEP5:** Yeah. I protect me and my family. And some of these things at work, we got kids that are in high school. You know, I've worked some suicides by young kids, and I've worked rape cases by young kids, and I don't say much when I get home about it because 9 times out of 10, our children go to school with these people.

One spouse described the unique experience that law enforcement professional spouses have living in a community that their law enforcement professional husband sees with a perspective of work-related traumatic events.

**Spouse3:** Yeah. And I mean, my God, when we were looking to buy our first house, it was in [town] where [LEP3] was working, and it was hard to even buy a house because we would drive through a neighborhood, and [LEP3] would be like, "Oh, murder/suicide happened right there; pedophile lives right there; gang members right there."

The law enforcement professionals in the study also reported on how community perceptions of law enforcement added to the stressful nature of the job. Some couples expressed their experiences of feeling “labeled” by the public, emphasizing the stress that comes along with feeling distrusted: **LEP5** spoke about how he experienced being labeled by the public: “Oh my God, you're one of them guys. Not knowing me for who I am, but they automatically label me because I'm a cop, they label me because, well, I'm a killer.”

**LEP5:** So, when you have the stresses of the public looking in on you, and you have the stresses of the job, and the stresses of the public labeling you as a killer, and now you're having to deal with the mom who lost her child because of a car wreck, or the mom that lost her child because her child committed suicide, so you have all these stresses in one big ball.

Another law enforcement professional described how they were perceived by the public and provided insight into how and why law enforcement professionals are trained to protect themselves in order to protect others:

**LEP6:** And that's where a lot of officers come across to the public as unempathetic, unfeeling, that kind of stuff because if you do, oftentimes, that can show that you're soft or your guard is down, and people take advantage of you. And so, there's this emotional and mental framework that you operate from to protect yourself. It's that officer survival.

The combination of work-related stress from community relationships, expectations of police culture, and job demands created the context in which work-related traumatic events take place. While couples described that all work-related stress had an impact on their relationship, work-related traumatic events heightened the law enforcement professional's symptoms of post-traumatic stress and the spouse's symptoms of secondary traumatic stress.



*Code: Work-related Traumatic Events*

All of the couples reported that the law enforcement professional was exposed to or involved in a number of work-related traumatic events that had a direct impact on their relationship. Work-related traumatic events referred to instances in which there was: (1) a direct physical threat to the law enforcement professional (e.g., the law enforcement professional being shot, physical attack that resulted in injury, high-speed car chase) or (2) an indirect threat to the law enforcement professional (e.g., witnessing a suicide, responding to fatal accidents involving children, exposure to severe child abuse or neglect). While couples agreed that work-related traumatic events had an impact on the couple relationship, their experiences diverged in terms of which work-related traumatic events (direct versus indirect) led to more individual symptoms of post-traumatic stress or secondary traumatic stress.

Spouses felt that work-related traumatic events involving direct physical danger to the law enforcement professional led to more symptoms of secondary traumatic stress (e.g., trouble sleeping, hypervigilance). Law enforcement professionals validated their spouse's perceptions of these work-related traumatic events and acknowledged the profound impact that events involving a direct threat to the officer led to their spouses' symptoms of secondary traumatic stress.

In contrast, law enforcement professionals felt that work-related traumatic events that involved more indirect threats had a more significant impact on their own symptoms of post-traumatic stress (e.g., emotional distress, flashbacks). Spouses spoke in agreement with the law enforcement professionals, affirming that law enforcement professionals' symptoms of post-traumatic stress were more noticeable following indirect work-related traumatic events.

**Sub code: Physically Threatening Work-related Traumatic Events.** Spouses of law enforcement professionals experienced more symptoms of secondary traumatic stress following

direct work-related traumatic events (e.g., like the law enforcement professional being involved in a shooting or having to pull his weapon or the law enforcement professional experiencing an injury from a physical altercation with a perpetrator). In the following quotes, two spouses described heightened symptoms of secondary traumatic stress following direct work-related traumatic events.

**Spouse1:** I was worried. I had trouble sleeping after that, not because he was gone; I was afraid he wasn't gonna come back home. So, I guess because he was gone. But I hadn't really had any stress before that incident because I didn't really have anything to go off of. But yeah, that was my experience with it.

**Spouse2:** And then, from my perspective, as the spouse of a police officer, it is constantly in the back of your head every time you say goodbye to them, I always used to say to him, "Come home safe to me." And you text them, and if they don't text back right away, you start worrying, like, oh my gosh, what's he involved in? What's he doing? I hope everything's okay.

Law enforcement professionals expressed an awareness of how the impact of direct work-related traumatic events impact their spouse's level of stress symptoms, which led to his own hesitation to share the happenings of the event with his wife:

**LEP1:** I said, "I don't want to call my wife. I don't want to call her. I know this is going to freak her out." And I, actually, didn't call her first until one of my coworkers said, "Dude, she's gonna be pissed at you if you don't call. You need to call her."

**Sub code: Psychologically Threatening Work-related Traumatic Events.** Law enforcement professionals reported experiencing indirect work-related traumatic events (e.g., exposure to severe child abuse/neglect, witnessing suicide, fatal accidents involving children) as

being more emotionally distressful. While these events did not involve a high amount of physical threat to the law enforcement professional, they recalled these indirect work-related traumatic events as evoking more emotion for them. For example, one law enforcement professional described waiting with a child whose parent had just been arrested for drug charges, saying that it was “really, really, depressing” (**LEP2**). The law enforcement professional’s spouse expressed how she witnessed the impact that this particular event had on the law enforcement professional’s emotions:

**Spouse2:** ...that was an interesting moment in our relationship because it was the first time, A.) That he brought home that level of emotion from his work, and B.) It wasn't even a situation where he was unsafe, or in any kind of danger, or anything like that, and it had a super profound impact on him.

### **Theme Two: Impact of Work-Related Traumatic Stress on the Couple Relationship**

All of the couples agreed that work-related traumatic events, coupled with the overall work-related stress of the law enforcement profession, had an impact on multiple aspects of the couple relationship. Couples were asked to comment on specific areas of their couple relationship that experienced impact following a work-related traumatic event. When asked about how they experienced the impact of work-related traumatic stress on their relationship, law enforcement professional and spousal responses centered around (1) withholding communication patterns, (2) unequitable division of household and parenting, (3) a lack of quality time, and (4) questioning and strengthening commitment. Within each of these relationship areas, couples engaged in dialogue surrounding the relational impacts of work-related traumatic stress.

***Code: Withholding Communication Pattern***

Couples described the strenuous communication patterns that emerge following work-related traumatic events. Law enforcement professionals reported that they often withhold details of work-related traumatic events in an effort to align with expectations of police culture (i.e., an expectation to withhold an emotional response). Spouses reported that they could tell when the law enforcement professional experienced a work-related traumatic event whether or not the law enforcement professional disclosed details of the event. Furthermore, spouses reported engaging in a similar effort to withhold their emotional response in order to help the law enforcement professional to carry on with their duties. The following law enforcement professional expressed his concern around sharing details of a physically threatening work-related traumatic event with his wife, knowing that it will worry her: **LEP1** said, “I don't know how much I want to share that with my spouse who's at home waiting for me to come home in the morning.”

Still, spouses reported that they could tell when the law enforcement professional experienced a work-related traumatic event whether or not the law enforcement professional disclosed details of the actual event. This spouse expressed her understanding of why her husband did not share details with her and the law enforcement professional expresses how “she just knows” when he has had an emotionally impactful day at work.

**Spouse5:** Most of the stuff that you don't tell me is really to protect me... You don't tell me the details of a child sex crime or any sex crimes really. You don't talk to me too much about those. Most of the stuff that he doesn't tell me is not because he can't tell me, it's just because he protects me from it.

**LEP5:** You know, [LEP] can always tell when I've either had a bad day or something major as went on because I come home – I'm pretty quiet. I don't say a whole lot.

Sometimes I get a little aggravated, and then she just – I don't know, she just knows.

Additionally, spouses sometimes reported feeling frustrated by the law enforcement's lack of emotional expression following a work-related traumatic event. One couple described their divergent perspectives on whether or not the law enforcement professionals lack of emotional expression was minimizing:

**Spouse3:** And I think that felt very minimizing, where it was like, I understand he didn't want to worry, and he didn't want me to worry, but that wasn't really gonna make me not worry.

**LEP3:** For her, I see that it felt like I was minimizing everything, but at that position, I was there for – we worked 12-hour shifts a lot. I was there more than I was home, so that's not something – I had to minimize it, basically, and I think a lot of people in that position do. You have to minimize it because it's just your day-to-day. It's normal.

**Spouse3:** He would come home and not want to talk about it, or just act like it was fine. And I am the exact opposite. I process everything very verbally, and I want to go over it, and how do we feel about this. Let's really beat it to death. And not being able to get that out of him was like...I didn't want him to implode because you hear the horror stories about the cops that have been on the job for 20 years, and the stress gets to them, and they just start beating their wives or drinking.

Other spouses described how they withheld personal stressors from the law enforcement professional in an effort to manage the law enforcement professional's level of work-related stress. Spouses reported withholding their emotional reactions to work-related events in an effort

not to evoke an emotional outburst from the law enforcement professional. In the following quote, the spouse described making an additional effort to connect with the law enforcement professional in ways that do not demand emotion from the law enforcement professional.

**Spouse6:** You don't demand so much emotionally from them. You try to learn how to navigate life around them, and to keep them from exploding, kind of. And you try to find different ways to reach in and connect with them.

One spouse detailed how they withhold from asking for the law enforcement professional's help with any potential household or parenting duties following impactful work-related traumatic events:

**Spouse4:** And so, I think that's one theme for me is, yeah, you can be incredibly independent. Because during these critical incidents, that is how you feel. Even when we're in complete communication breakdown, I try so hard to not ask for anything, and then when I literally just can't do it, it's one text.

In sum, couples in this study described making mutual efforts to manage each other's emotions through withholding or filtering what they share with one another.

***Code: Unequitable Division of Household and Parenting***

The majority (62.5%) of couples in this study reported having children and noted the unequal division of household duties and parenting as being an area of tension in the relationship. Spouses reported that they were responsible for a majority of the parenting and household tasks in the home and that their responsibilities were heightened following work-related traumatic events. In turn, law enforcement professionals with children agreed that their spouse takes on a larger responsibility in parenting and acknowledged the tension that it can cause in the relationship. These spouses found it especially important to note the unequal breakdown of

parenting responsibilities sometimes led to a buildup of resentment towards the law enforcement professional or the law enforcement profession.

**Spouse6:** I will say, just one perspective that I think might be important is if there's anything that builds up resentment from the spouse's perspective, it is what you could call unequitable breakdown of parenting responsibilities/household chores that would be on the spouse during times of critical incidents.

**Spouse4:** Even if you, for instance, always feel like I'm always doing a little bit more, during those times, you're really doing more. And that, more than anything, more than the lack of quality time, more than feeling misunderstood in your own job, that to me builds up the most amount of resentment that I think is the hardest for a spouse to overcome would be feeling that way. Feeling like we go from critical incident to critical incident, and when's it my freaking turn to not do anything? It never is gonna be.

Even couples without children expressed anxiety around the thought of having children as a law enforcement couple. One spouse reported knowing other law enforcement spouses with children who “feel like single mothers.”

**Spouse2:** 100%. I can't imagine having kids in this situation.

**LEP2:** It'd be hard.

**Spouse2:** I've been seeing some of these mothers feel like single mothers.

Alongside an unequitable breakdown of parenting and household responsibilities, couples described how differences in discipline styles relate back to the law enforcement professionals job demands and characteristics.

**Sub-code: Discipline.** Couples also described differences parenting styles led to conflict in the relationship. In particular, spouses felt that the law enforcement professional their children,

which led to conflict between the spouse and law enforcement professional. Law enforcement professional explained that their discipline style comes from a place of wanting to protect their children and teach them how to protect themselves. One law enforcement professional expressed his awareness of how he can be “harsh” towards his children, explaining that the harshness is usually the result of witnessing tragic events involving children while on the job. Their harsh protectiveness emerges from a place of experiencing memories and flashbacks to work-related traumatic events involving children.

**LEP6:** You kind of get a little more harsh because you don't want anything bad to happen to them, but you're doing it in a way that is, I think, as a response to the incident. You're like, "Stop that." Or, "Don't do that." And you come across harsh because you're really wanting them to just do the right thing and not get hurt. Or you're trying to protect them. Then it becomes kind of a harsh projection after that.

Spouses described how they witness their law enforcement professional's discipline tactics and often take on the role of a “buffer” between the children and the law enforcement professional's harsh discipline tactics. This spouse later goes on to describe that her husband's harsh discipline softened over time, although it continues to have an emotional impact on the children.

**Spouse6:** And so, he took the position of the roaring, my-way-or-the-highway, bad cop, kind of thing, and my position became a buffer for the children. And you can imagine that created conflict in parenting.

**Spouse6:** So, it's different now, the way we deal with it, than it was, I would say, during the first 15 years. And the way the children – the children were profoundly impacted. The older ones, especially our eldest, they're still healing going on there. Because none of us



knew what we were dealing with trying to deal with compounding, ongoing trauma. We had no idea what that was doing to their dad.

***Code: Lack of Quality Time***

All of the couples mentioned that the law enforcement profession had an impact on both the amount and quality of time spent as a couple. The amount of time that they had to connect as a couple were often limited by the demands of the law enforcement professionals work, especially following work-related traumatic events. Couples also noted that work-related traumatic events had an impact on their relationships with friends and family.

**Sub code: As a Couple.** Couples recounted that their quality time was shortened by demanding nature of the law enforcement profession. For instance, couples depicted times when their schedules did not align (e.g., the law enforcement professional was on the night shift) and how it caused frequent tension in their relationship when they first got together.

**Spouse5:** It's hard to even have quality time when you're in the middle of it because he was, to your earlier point, exhausted, and oftentimes, kind of, somewhere out, I think, in your head. And then, the whole not having normal weekends and not being able to spend holidays together. And we were lucky because we managed to spend most holidays together.

**Sub code: Time with Friends and Family.** Couples also conveyed how their quality time with friends and family was influenced by work-related stress and work-related traumatic events. One spouse spoke about how difficult it was to make plans with other couples after her husband pursued a career law enforcement which involved working night shift:

**Spouse1:** For example, it was difficult to make plans with other couples or other friends because he sleeps during the day. And so, not communicating those things would make it

difficult because I always felt like we were missing out because our friends all have normal lives, and we're living as racoons. And so, it was just weird. But I think that was also a difficult part.

Another spouse described having to turn down social plans because of her husband's work:

**Spouse2:** What that also meant is that I was by myself a lot. And we turned down a lot of social plans, and things like that, because [LEP2] would be at work on Friday and Saturday nights when other people are not at work and want to do social things. So, it had an impact on our friendships as well.

*Code: Questioning and Strengthening Commitment*

Couples described how work-related traumatic events led to questioning (1) their commitment to the relationship and/or (2) their commitment to the profession. In particular, newlywed couples said that work-related traumatic were a wake-up call to the dangers involved in the law enforcement profession. One spouse described a work-related traumatic event that led to a heavy realization of law enforcement professional's experience.

**Spouse3:** And he was, literally, carrying this woman's body out of a house. And when he called me afterwards and let me know, it just was the first domino where I was like, oh, my God, that's what he's gonna be doing, and this is what he's gonna be bringing home, and that's what he's seeing.

The same spouse later mentioned how work-related traumatic events eventually led them to having a conversation about the law enforcement professional leaving the profession:

**Spouse3:** And he was shooting at the officers, or they thought that he was shooting at them, and that was really scary for me. And that was the first time that I thought, okay, I don't really want him to do this anymore.

Three spouses described times when they wanted the law enforcement professional to leave the profession. Two spouses whose expressed they would not have chosen to be partnered with a law enforcement professional if their partner had been a law enforcement professional at the time that their relationship began. One partner described her feelings about their partner becoming a law enforcement professional after their relationship began:

**Spouse2:** Had he been a police officer when we started dating, I probably wouldn't have dated him just because that was not the lifestyle that I wanted for myself, or that I would have willingly signed up for.

The majority of law enforcement professionals also mentioned questioning their commitment to remain in the profession during times of high work-related stress. They also expressed an awareness of how the stress from the job carried over into their couple's relationships.

**LEP4:** And there are sometimes where I'm like, I don't want to do this job anymore. I really, really don't want to do this job anymore. I don't want to screw my kids up; I don't want to screw my family up. And then, she encourages me. And she's like, "You know what? You're really good at this. You have a passion for this."

While couples reported that experiencing critical incidents led to questioning commitment to both the job and to the relationship, all of the couples remained in a committed relationship, with most of the law enforcement professional remaining in the profession. In fact, many shared that their commitment to one another was strengthened following work-related traumatic events. It was as if these critical incidents bonded the couple in a way that, in turn, strengthened each member's commitment to the relationship. The following quote illustrates both the questioning of commitment to the job and the eventual strengthening of the relationship:

**LEP6:** And so, I think that those types of events can, I think, strengthen a relationship because I think as a law enforcement spouse, you also know that there can come a knock on the door. And that happened to one of our dear friends in an area that I worked in.....and those types of events really have you question that sometimes, am I doing the right thing? Am I in the right line of work? What happens if I was killed in the line of duty? So, I think those types of things strengthen your relationship, but also it can strain it too because I think both (Spouse) and the strain – you know, that young family we had, it was like, wow, there is a lot of stress in this job. And I think it does put stress on them a lot, especially if they don't know what you're doing.

### **Theme Three: Protective Factors and Resilient Coping Characteristics**

The American Psychological Association (n.d.) defines resilience as “the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands” (para.1). Couples in this study described how they placed more value on the relationship following work-related traumatic events through accepting the implications of the job demands and acknowledging what it entails for their relationship. Over time, couples became intentional in creating space to process the emotional impact of work-related traumatic events. Alongside their intentionality in processing work-related traumatic events as a couple, law enforcement professionals and spouses relied on emotional support through sharing with other law enforcement professional and spouses, attending couples' therapy, and engaging in spiritual practices.

***Code: Couple Intentionality***

The majority of couples mentioned how they learned the importance of setting being intentional about setting aside time together, especially following a work-related traumatic event. Couples described prioritized time as a couple in order to communicate as a couple without distractions. Following work-related traumatic events, couples placed more intention in the time that they spent together. For instance:

**Spouse3:** So, you just had to make the best of that time. And it, I think, also taught me to pick my battles, if that makes – I've always had a temper, and I used to almost pick fights, like, look for issues. And part of it was not having a lot of time together. You know, I don't want to waste that on petty grievances. And the other part of it was, he's going to work tonight, and he gets shot, do I want our last conversation to be me yelling at him over leaving a wet towel on the floor? So, I think it helped me grow up a little bit, and learn what's, actually, important, and what I need to focus on, and what are real issues, and what are just things that I need to get over and work through myself.

**LEP3:** No. I mean, I would agree with that. I don't know how picky she was with the fights because I did hear a lot about the towel, still. No, I mean, like she said, majority of my career in law enforcement was on night shift, unfortunately. So, we did not get to see each other nearly as often as I was seeing other people. So, I can understand how it could cause a lot of stress because, essentially, we get to talk to each other on the phone, maybe, once a day, or text throughout the day, but that's pretty much it. So, you have to find those little things, like she was saying, the notes that we would leave to each other every day to do something just to feel like there's any connection because we, literally, shared a bed, and didn't sleep in it together but twice a month.

A spouse from another couple reported that she and her husband had a similar experience, expressing that they placed more meaning on the time that they were able to spend together.

**Spouse5** said, “Yeah, I mean, I think we've talked a lot about that. So, now we enjoy our quality time. Before, I think, we wasted it.” One couple, married for fourteen years, suggested the importance of setting aside time for daily conversations without their kids present (e.g., conversations about work-related incidents/stressors, finances, parenting decisions):

**Spouse5:** But that's what we set it aside for, so that we can just resolve things between ourselves, and we don't involve our children, or our coworkers, or friends, or whatever. So, I think that that's a real important part of our relationship.

**LEP5:** I mean, I really think that that's what makes our relationship tick. I mean, obviously, we love each other, but really is communication. You know? you can't – with our lives as hectic as they are, the kids, my job, getting called out all hours of the night, working late, she works late sometimes.

***Code: Sharing with Law Enforcement Friends and Family***

Law enforcement professionals and their spouses mentioned the benefit of processing work-related traumatic events with other law enforcement professionals and law enforcement professional spouses. Couples stressed the importance of consoling in others who they know will understand their unique experiences with work-related traumatic stress. One spouse spoke about the support she found in spending time with another law enforcement spouse:

**Spouse:** So, I mean, that helped me a lot, especially because [LEP spouse] didn't want to talk about it. At least [LEP spouse] and I could, kind of, debrief each other, and that was really nice to have one other person to talk to that knew exactly what it was like.

An LEP described the benefit he received from processing a work-related traumatic event with a fellow professional:

**LEP1:** I just started talking. I was like, "Man, that kind of sucked. I just keep thinking about that." He was like, "I'm glad you said something. That, actually, really did suck. That really bothered me." We just started talking about it. And I felt so much better just, literally, after talking about this. Just kind of saying, this really sucked, and this is why this sucked, and just talking through it, talking through what we saw, and just processing it.

***Code: The Role of Spirituality in Managing Stress***

Three couples mentioned spirituality being a large support to their relationship in terms of managing the stress of the law enforcement profession (e.g., praying together, attending church services). Other participants mentioned spirituality and prayer as something that they incorporate into their life more on an individual level. For example, many spouses mentioned prayer in direct relation to stress from the law enforcement profession and praying that the law enforcement comes home safe.

**Spouse3:** But then there would be so many nights where – my anxiety laying in bed while he was at work, and I hadn't heard from him in hours, would stifle me, and I would just pray about it. It was like that was my first instinct was to just say, God, please keep [LEP] safe. I know you've got me. Please help me breath. Calm me down. Please keep [LEP] safe.

***Code: Seeking Couple's Therapy***

Five couples in this study spoke about seeking couples' therapy as a support in managing work-related traumatic stress in their relationship. Law enforcement professionals and spouses

mentioned individual therapy work also helping with the personal and relational impacts of work-related traumatic events. One law enforcement professional explained how attending couple's therapy was helpful in that it provided a "disinterested third party":

**LEP2:** And a third-party perspective is super helpful in that. Because it's easy, at least personally, for me to get stuck in the weeds and not have a good perspective. And when you can take a step back through the eyes of a disinterested third party, is probably the – yeah, neutral third party, it's easier to see things more in a different light, and in a positive light.

Another law enforcement professional spoke about how helpful individual therapy was for him, mentioning the benefits of Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) in particular. **LEP6** spoke about his experience and said, "And he [the department psychologist] did a little experimental exercise (EMDR) on me to help me to separate the emotion from the event and end the memory. And that really helped."

Couples shared how, over time, they learned how to engage in resilient coping characteristics that can buffer against to relational impacts of work-related traumatic stress. In other words, protective factors and resilient coping characteristics that couples utilized accumulated over the time. Couples emphasized the importance of conceptualizing work-related traumatic stress as a continuous experience that impacts the relationship. In addition, couples reported that their commitment to the relationship was strengthened as a result of their shared experiences with work-related traumatic stress.



## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

To our knowledge, this is the first qualitative study conducted to-date on law enforcement couples using dyadic data. Previous literature focuses primarily on the law enforcement professional's experience of work-related traumatic stress (Ansel, 2000; Craun, Courke, Bierie & Williams, 2014; Follette, Polusny, & Milbeck, 1994; Gershon, Barocas, & Canton, 2009; Hartley et al., 2013; Krause, 2009; Rees & Smith, 2008). Far fewer studies address the phenomenon of secondary traumatic stress in law enforcement spouses (Landers et al., 2019; Maynard, Maynard, & McCubbin, 1980; Meffert et al., 2014) and even less delve into how work-related traumatic stress impacts the law enforcement couple relationship (Roberts & Levenson, 2001; Landers et al., 2019). This study builds upon the small body of literature utilizing secondary traumatic stress theory to better understand the relational experiences of law enforcement couples (Landers et al., 2019; Meffert et. al, 2014). While previous literature captures an individual's perspective regarding the impact of work-related stress on the couple's relationship (Landers et al., 2019), the lack of dyadic data limits the rich description of relationship patterns. By including both members of the couple, this study contributes increased knowledge into the nuances of how traumatic stress is experienced in law enforcement couples. While past qualitative studies have given insight to the experiences of trauma law enforcement spouses and couples from the spouse's perspective (Landers et al., 2019), the current study offers advanced knowledge on communication, commitment, and resiliency in law enforcement couples from a dyadic perspective. Couples displayed unique communication patterns surrounding work-related traumatic stress and reported withholding emotional reactions following exposure to work-related traumatic events. Couples also reported that there was a heightened awareness of unequal parenting and household responsibilities in the wake of work-related traumatic events. In

addition, couples revealed how their commitment to one another, and to the profession were ultimately strengthened by work-related traumatic events. Finally, couples activated resilient coping characteristics following work-related traumatic events that enabled them to remain intentional in processing the impact of work-related traumatic stress as a couple.

The first major finding of this study was that the impact of work-related traumatic events differed for the law enforcement professional and their spouse based on the type of traumatic event to which the law enforcement professional was exposed. Previous research suggests that traumatic stress can involve direct exposure to a perceived threat, as well as being witness to a traumatic event or being repeatedly exposed to adverse details or images of an event (Landers, et al., 2019; Miller, 2000; Perez, Jones, Englert, & Sachau, 2010). Spouses of law enforcement professionals report that events involving children, suicide, and the death of a fellow law enforcement professional appear to have significant impact on the law enforcement professional (Landers et al., 2019). Building on extant research, this study found that the direct or indirect nature of the traumatic event elicited differential reactions in the law enforcement professional and their spouse. For instance, work-related traumatic events that involved a physical threat to the law enforcement professional (e.g., being shot at, physical altercations, chases, etc.) were more likely to elicit visceral or post-traumatic stress reactions in the spouse (e.g., difficulty sleeping, hypervigilance, generalized anxiety). In contrast, indirect work-related traumatic events (e.g., involving the death of a fellow officer, witnessing a suicide, and emergency response calls involving tragic outcomes for children or families) had a greater emotional or psychological impact on the law enforcement professional. These findings are consistent with past research on secondary traumatic stress theory, which states that direct exposure to a traumatic event is not

necessary and that even witnessing traumatic events can elicit post-traumatic stress reactions (Figley, 1995).

The second major finding of this study relates to the dyadic communication patterns that couples displayed in the wake of work-related traumatic events. Previous research indicates that exposure to work-related traumatic stress impacts couple's communication and can amplify already existing issues in communication (Landers et al., 2019). Law enforcement spouses become frustrated with the lack of communication within their relationships and suggest that such frustration only adds to the stress of dealing with work-related traumatic stress when it arises (Brodie & Eppler, 2012). In addition, communication can serve as a resource to couples in the midst of managing the impact of work-related traumatic stress on the couple's relationship (Henry et al., 2011; Landers et al., 2019). As such, communication strategies enable spouses to support one another and provide them with a method of coping with and responding to work-related trauma (e.g., increasing or decreasing particular types of communication following a work-related traumatic event) (Henry et al., 2011).

In this study, couples acknowledged filtering or withholding information and/or reactions during communication following exposure to a work-related traumatic event. Law enforcement professionals withheld their emotional response to work-related traumatic events in an effort to align with expectations of police culture and to protect their spouse and family from the potential emotional impact of exposure to details of the event. Often law enforcement professionals struggle to know how much detail to disclose to their spouses following a work-related traumatic event. Consistent with previous research finding that spouses can experience distress following a work-related traumatic event whether or not the law enforcement professional discloses the details of a work-related incident (Regher, Dimitropoulos, Bright, Georgie, & Henderson, 2005;

Regehr, 2005), spouses in this study were able to detect the law enforcement professional's reactions or withholding of reactions to work-related traumatic stress. Parallel to the law enforcement professional's process, spouses of law enforcement professionals often struggle with knowing if and how to ask the law enforcement professional about work-related stress. While past findings suggest that those who "marry into" police culture often adopt a similar mentality of being strong and honoring the law enforcement culture (Johnson, Todd, & Subramanian, 2005), spouses in this study provide more insight into why spouses adopt a similar mentality to the law enforcement professional. Spouses in this study described that they withheld their own emotional reactions following work-related traumatic events in an effort to avoid triggering the law enforcement professional which potentially led to couple conflict. In sum, law enforcement professionals battle with how much information to withhold or disclose to their spouses following work-related traumatic events, and spouses battle with how much to withhold or disclose their personal emotions to the law enforcement professional. This pattern of dyadic or reciprocal withholding is evidence of couple's mutual concern for one another in the midst of managing work-related traumatic stress.

Couples in this study described experiencing the impact of work-related stress and work-related traumatic stress in their parenting relationship, which is consistent with previous research stating that traumatic stress can spillover into the parenting and family life (Johnson, Todd, & Subramanian 2005). This study found that couples experience a heightened awareness of unequal parenting and household responsibilities following work-related traumatic events. Spouses reported that they carried a heavier load in their roles as parent, which led to some spouses feeling resentment towards the law enforcement professional and the law enforcement profession. In addition, couples expressed experiencing conflict related to differences in

parenting styles. Spouses expressed that they tend to act as a “buffer” between the law enforcement professional and their children in the midst of harsher discipline. Law enforcement professionals explained how moments of harsher discipline are a result of their exposure to work-related traumatic events involving children (e.g., responding to fatal accidents involving children or witnessing or knowing about severe child abuse or neglect). Spouses highlighted that law enforcement professionals became more aware of the emotional impact of their disciplinary style over time.

Another major finding of this study relates to law enforcement couple’s high levels of commitment in response to work-related traumatic stress. Previous research suggests that professional demands and departmental loyalties often compete with law enforcement professional’s marriages, particularly with regard to time and commitment (Miller, 2007). Such research describes the division of loyalty between the law enforcement professional’s commitment to the profession and their commitment to the couple’s relationship (Miller, 2007). In particular, such research suggests that spouses feel left out or even jealous of the law enforcement professional’s commitment to the profession, implying they do not feel as if they are one with the profession. In this study, couples described a different experience, one in which both members of the couple identified intense loyalty to the law enforcement profession. This is not to say that the spouses in this study did not compete for the law enforcement professional’s time and attention, but rather that they described their role as spouse as complimentary to the law enforcement professional. Spouses of law enforcement described experiencing a level of loyalty and commitment to the profession that mirrored that of the law enforcement professional (Roberts & Levenson, 2001). Commitment was evident in two facets – to the relationship and to the law enforcement profession. Work-related traumatic events triggered couples to reflect on

their commitment to each other and, in turn, to the law enforcement profession. Spouses expressed how work-related traumatic events (especially those involving direct physical threat to the law enforcement professional) forced them to acknowledge how work-related traumatic events and stress were an inevitable facet of their relationship with the law enforcement professional. Couples had conversations about the potential of the law enforcement professional leaving the profession for the sake of the couple relationship or family in an effort to alleviate work-related traumatic stress. Despite the impact of work-related traumatic stress has on the couple relationship, all of the couples in this study ultimately came to a place where they solidified or re-solidified their commitment to one another and to the profession.

Couples in this study adapted to work-related traumatic stress and exhibited resilient couple characteristics. Consistent with previous research, couples in this study learned to accept the demands of the law enforcement profession (Maynard, Maynard, McCubbin & Shao, 1980) and expressed an awareness of the negative coping characteristics of other law enforcement couples and families. For example, past studies have illuminated the higher rates aggression and domestic violence in law enforcement families (Anderson & Lo, 2011; Mennicke & Ropes, 2016), as well as higher rates of substance abuse in law enforcement professionals. (Ballenger et al., 2010; Lindsay & Shelley, 2009). The couples in this study acknowledged the potential outcomes of relationship (e.g., coping with alcohol, experiencing violence in the home) if they were not intentional about coping as a couple. Our study showed that couples moved beyond acceptance and into an acknowledgement of the implications that the profession has for their relationship. This means that couples recognized when they needed to address work-related traumatic stress within their relationship and activated resilient coping characteristics. This finding is consistent with previous research on law enforcement spouses who reported the

importance of remaining conscious about coping as a couple and communicating about their exposure to work-related traumatic events (Landers et al., 2019).

### **Clinical Implications**

Law enforcement couples face unique struggles in that they experience repeated exposure to work-related to events. Previous research indicates that law enforcement couples are at an increased risk for experiencing not only symptoms of post-traumatic stress symptoms, but also violence in their relationship (Meffert et al., 2014; Mennicke & Ropes, 2016). Past researchers have drawn attention to alarming amount of risk factors associated with domestic violence with the police culture (e.g., violence exposure, alcohol abuse, authoritarianism) (Johnson, Todd, & Subramanian, 2005) and more current research draws attention to the complex nature of domestic and family violence in law enforcement families because of the a “code of silence” that the law enforcement community engages in order to protect their careers (Stinson & Liederbach, 2012). While the couples in this study did not report on instances of domestic violence in their relationships, it is important for marriage and family therapists to consider the clinical implications for working with this high-risk population. Implications for marriage and family therapists working with law enforcement couples could include becoming more knowledgeable of the job demands of the law enforcement profession and the associated police culture characteristics. For instance, while law enforcement professionals may be quick to encounter stressful and even traumatic situations during the course of their work (e.g., being shot at, witnessing death), they are hesitant to share those experiences with others, whether that be with their spouse or with a marriage and family therapist. Marriage and therapists can create and awareness how the therapeutic process might encounter barriers related to the difficulty law enforcement professionals face in seeking help “outside of the culture.”

Marriage and family therapists would benefit from knowledge and awareness of work-related traumatic stress on law enforcement couples. Awareness of the specific impact of work-related traumatic stress should inform the couple's assessment and treatment objectives. It is important for marriage and family therapists and other mental health professionals to remain cognizant that work-related events led to traumatic stress symptoms whether or not the law enforcement professional was involved in a physically threatening work-related traumatic event. Our findings also suggest that law enforcement couples exhibit specific patterns of withholding emotional reactions following work-related traumatic events. Marriage and family therapists should be prepared to work with this communication pattern, utilizing particular techniques that address unhelpful communication patterns (e.g., teaching couples speaker listener skills, active listening, and other communication skills). Couple accounts from this study also indicated that the role relationship can be especially overwhelming for the law enforcement couples who are also parents. Couples would likely benefit from marriage and family therapists creating space for law enforcement couples to assess their role relationships when it comes to parenting, household responsibilities, and scheduling quality time as a couple or with friends and family. Alongside working with law enforcement couples to create more helpful communication patterns and role relationships, marriage and family therapists should be aware of protective factors and resilient coping characteristics that law enforcement couples are already utilizing to buffer against the impact of work-related traumatic stress.

In this study, law enforcement couples activated resilient coping characteristics in response to work-related traumatic stress. It can be helpful for marriage and family therapists to build upon the population-specific resilient characteristics of law enforcement couples that act as protective factors to the relational impacts of work-related traumatic stress. For example,



marriage and family therapists who are aware of resilient couple coping characteristics could work with couples from a strength-based perspective, recognizing the couple's ability to adapt to work-related traumatic stress as a couple and with support from the greater law enforcement community. Couples in this study emphasized the importance of approaching conversations surrounding work-related traumatic stress with intention. In other words, law enforcement couples in this study learned that remaining intentional about when and how they communicate with one another about work-related traumatic stress. Marriage and family therapists working with law enforcement couples could inquire about how the couples have learned to communicate with one another in response to work-related traumatic stress.

### **Limitations**

While this study expands upon previous research on the impact of work-related stress in law enforcement couples, it is not without notable limitations. Such limitations relate to sampling and the sample composition. For instance, there could be a lack of generalizability due to the limited sample size and type of sampling used (i.e., purposeful snowball sampling). The results may be specific to this sample of law enforcement couples and may not represent the experiences of law enforcement couples as a whole. The participants in this study were predominantly White, heterosexual, college educated, and had household income of over \$100,000. In particular, this study may not represent the racial, ethnic, and sexual orientation minority statuses in law enforcement couples. While this study provides a rich description of the participants' experiences of being a law enforcement couple, future qualitative data collection should aim to gather a more diverse sample of law enforcement couple and intentionally include law enforcement couples of minority status.

It is important to note that differences between in-person and phone interviews could not be clearly identified as only one couple was interviewed in-person. This limits the amount of differences that researchers were able to determine if there was a difference between the types of patterns that emerged based upon whether couples were interviewed over the phone or in person. Furthermore, purposeful snowball sampling might have yielded sampling bias. For example, couples who came forward to participate might have been in more positive places with the sensitive subject matter (i.e., have processed work-related traumatic events more). Other study limitations stem from the dyadic interview process (i.e., participants might have sanitized their response in the presence of their spouse (Morgan, 2010). For example, the law enforcement professional might be hesitant to disclose the true nature of work-related traumatic stress in the presence of their spouse for the fear that their disclosure might burden the spouse.

### **Future Directions**

This study was the first to collect dyadic, qualitative data on the experiences of law enforcement couples and how work-related traumatic stress impacts their relationship and brought awareness to areas of future research. Given that many couples described the impact that work-related traumatic events had on law enforcement children, future qualitative research should examine the impact of work-related traumatic stress on children of law enforcement professionals and relationships with their children. Since research suggests that both spousal relationships and relationships with children are helpful in coping with work-related traumatic stress (Craun, Bourke, Bierie, & Williams, 2014). Research focused on the law enforcement parent-child relationship could potentially illuminate the impact of work-related traumatic stress on relational dynamics between law enforcement professionals and their children. Gaining more knowledge on law enforcement parent-child relationships could highlight resilient coping

characteristics of law enforcement children and further information marriage and family therapists on how to work with law enforcement families. Findings from this study also indicate that law enforcement couples could also benefit from relationship education workshops with aims related to their specific experiences related to work-related traumatic stress. Empirically based relationship education workshops and resources could provide couples with skills and communication practices intended to strengthen their relationship, and the space and time to process the relational impacts of the profession. Future research efforts.

### **Conclusion**

This study explored the impact of work-related traumatic stress on law enforcement couples using dyadic interviews. This study contributes to the growing body of literature utilizing secondary traumatic stress theory to better understand the impact of work-related traumatic stress on law enforcement couples. The impact of work-related traumatic stress manifested in couple's communication, role responsibilities and parenting, and commitment to the relationship and the profession. This study also illuminated that both physically threatening and psychologically threatening work-related traumatic events impact law enforcement couples and resulted in symptoms of traumatic stress. Couples portrayed resilient coping characteristics following work-related traumatic events and were intentional about processing the impacts of work-related traumatic stress as a couple. This study informs marriage and family therapists on the impacts of work-related traumatic stress on law enforcement couples and provides implications for working with law enforcement professionals and their spouses.

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**Appendix A**  
**Recruitment Email for Listservs**

Hello,

The purpose of this email is to share information about a research study on law enforcement couples. I am emailing to see if this study information could be shared with individuals in your organization. The aim of this study is to learn about the impact of work-related traumatic stress on the couple's relationship. We would like to learn about if/how the job impacts the law enforcement professional, their partner, and the couple relationship (e.g., strengths/supports, difficulties/strains). We are seeking to interview law enforcement professionals and their romantic partners/spouses.

Law enforcement couples may be eligible to participate if:

- (1) the law enforcement professional is an active or retired officer who served for at least two years
- (2) the law enforcement professional has experienced one or more work-related traumatic events
- (3) the couple has been in a committed relationship for at least one year
- (4) both members of the couple are at least 18 years old
- (5) both members of the couple are English speaking
- (6) both members of the couple consent to be interviewed together
- (7) both members of the couple consent for the interview to be audio recorded

The interview will be held at a time and place convenient to the couple. Phone interviews are an option in the place of in-person interview. Interviews will last 1.5 to 2 hours. Each couple will have the option to be entered into a raffle for two \$50 gift cards once all the interviews are completed.

Please let me know if you have any questions. Interested participants can be given my phone number (571-356-9348) and email (averyca@vt.edu) or we would be glad to contact them. Respectfully,

Avery Campbell (Co-Investigator)  
Graduate Assistant, Virginia Tech

Dr. Ashley Landers (Principal Investigator)  
Assistant Professor, Virginia Tech

**Appendix B**  
**Recruitment Email for Prospective Participants**

Hello,

The purpose of this email is to share information about a research study on law enforcement couples. The aim of this study is to learn about the impact of work-related traumatic stress on the couple's relationship. We would like to learn about if/how the job impacts the law enforcement professional, their partner, and the couple relationship (e.g., strengths/supports, difficulties/strains). We are seeking to interview law enforcement professionals and their romantic partners/spouses.

As a law enforcement couple, you may be eligible to participate if:

- (1) the law enforcement professional is an active or retired officer who served for at least two years
- (2) the law enforcement professional has experienced one or more work-related traumatic events
- (3) the couple has been in a committed relationship for at least one year
- (4) both members of the couple are at least 18 years old
- (5) both members of the couple are English speaking
- (6) both members of the couple consent to be interviewed together
- (7) both members of the couple consent for the interview to be audio recorded

The interview will be held at a time and place convenient to you as a couple. Phone interviews are an option in the place of in-person interview. Interviews will last 1.5 to 2 hours. Each couple will have the option to be entered into a raffle for two \$50 gift cards once all the interviews are completed.

Please let me know if you have any questions. Interested participants can contact me by phone number (571-356-9348) or email (averyca@vt.edu).

Respectfully,

Avery Campbell (Co-Investigator)  
Graduate Assistant, Virginia Tech

Dr. Ashley Landers (Principal Investigator)  
Assistant Professor, Virginia Tech

Appendix C  
Recruitment Flyer

# Call for Personal Experiences

## Law Enforcement Professionals and Romantic Partners

### Who, What, Where, When, Why?

**Who** are we looking for?

- Law Enforcement Professionals (active or retired) who have (1) at least two years of experience and (2) experienced a work-related traumatic event

**AND**

romantic partners of the law enforcement professional of at least one year.

**Where and When?**

- The interview will happen at a time and place convenient to you
- If you aren't available to meet in person, phone interviews are offered.

**Why?**

- To learn about your experiences as a couple as well as if/how the job impacts you as a law enforcement officer or their partner. To also learn about your couple relationship (ex: strengths/supports, difficulties/strains).

### Contact Information

If you have questions or are interested in participating, please contact:  
Co-Investigator: Avery Campbell  
Email: [averyca@vt.edu](mailto:averyca@vt.edu)  
Phone: (571) 356-9348

**Each participating couple will be entered into a raffle for a \$50 gift card at the completion of the interview.**



### **Appendix D Screening Guide**

Thank you for your interest in this study of law enforcement couple experiences with work-related traumatic stress. This is a brief screening of eight yes or no questions to determine your eligibility to participate in this research study.

1. Are you 18 years or older? Yes/No
2. Are you an active or retired law enforcement professional? Yes/No
3. If active, have you had at least two years of active duty experience? Yes/No
4. If yes, have you experienced at least one incident that you would consider to be a work-related traumatic experience? Yes/No
5. Have you been in an intimate partner relationship for at least 1 year? Yes/No
6. Are you comfortable being interviewed with your partner/spouse about work-related traumatic stress and how it might impact you as a couple?
7. Are you comfortable comprehending and speaking proficient English in a 90-120-minute interview?
8. What phone number and email address would you to be contacted at?

**Appendix E**  
**Research Informed Consent**  
**Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University**  
**Informed Consent for Participants in Research Projects Involving Human Subjects**

Thank you for your interest in this study of law enforcement couple experiences with work-related traumatic stress. Below is information regarding this study.

**Title of Project:** Exploring the Impact of Work-Related Traumatic Stress on Law Enforcement Couples

**Researchers:** Avery Campbell, M.S. Candidate  
 Co-Investigator

571-356-9348/averyca@vt.edu  
**Telephone/e-mail**

Ashley Landers, Ph.D  
 Principal Investigator, Committee Chair

703-538-3796/land0552@vt.edu  
**Telephone/e-mail**

**I. Purpose of Research:** This thesis research study is being conducted in fulfillment of the degree requirements for a master's in marriage and family therapy with the intent of publication. The purpose of the current study is to explore law enforcement couples' experiences of work-related traumatic stress.

**II. Procedures:** You will be asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire (5 to 10 minutes) and an audio-recorded interview lasting approximately 90-120 over the phone.

**III. Risks:** The researchers anticipate minimal risks for participating in this research study. Some interview questions may cause emotional discomfort, depending on personal experiences with the topic of the study.

If the interview becomes too emotionally distressing, the interview will cease, and researcher will provide mental health referrals should you wish to further process the thoughts and emotions that arise from the interview. Payment for service from any mental health providers to which you are referred shall be your responsibility, and shall not be covered by the researchers, nor Virginia Tech.

**IV. Benefits:** The answers you provide will help us learn about explore law enforcement couples' experiences of work-related traumatic stress so that mental health clinicians may better serve couples in which at least one partner is a law enforcement professional. Talking about your experiences may provide a cathartic benefit to you; however, no promise or guarantee of benefits has been made as an incentive for your participation.

**V. Confidentiality:** Every effort will be made to keep the information you provide strictly confidential. All identifying information provided in the audio-recorded interview will be removed and replaced with aliases in the typed transcript and study report.

Individuals with access to the audio recording and original transcript include the Principal Investigator, the Co-Investigator, and professional transcriptionists. The audiotapes will be destroyed as soon as they have been transcribed and checked.

Any identifiable information will be stored separately and securely from the coded data to protect your confidentiality. Portions of your interview text may be used verbatim in the thesis report and/or in subsequent publications, however, your name and other identifying information will not be disclosed on any reports or publications.

Please note the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (IRB) may view the study's data for auditing purposes. The IRB is responsible for the oversight of the protection of human participants involved in research.

**VI. Compensation:** Each couple that opts in will be entered into a raffle for one of two \$50 dollar gift cards for your participation. The raffle will be conducted after interviews have been completed with all participants. Please indicate if you would like to be entered in the raffle below:

We do want to be entered in the raffle.      We do not want to be entered in the raffle.

**VII. Freedom to Withdraw:** It is important for you to know that you are free to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty. You are free not to answer any questions that you choose or respond to what is being asked of you without penalty.

Please note that there may be circumstances under which the investigator may determine that a participant should not continue in the research study.

Should you withdraw or otherwise discontinue participation, you will be entered into the gift card raffle in accordance with the Compensation section of this document.

**VIII. Questions or Concerns.** Should you have any questions about this study, you may contact one of the research investigators whose contact information is included at the beginning of this document.

Should you have any questions or concerns about the study's conduct or your rights as a research participant, or need to report a research-related injury or event, you may contact the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board at [irb@vt.edu](mailto:irb@vt.edu) or (540) 231-3732.

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Participant's Name	Date
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Participant's Name	Date
--------------------	------

**Appendix F**  
**Verbal Research Informed Consent**  
**Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University**  
**Informed Consent for Participants in Research Projects Involving Human Subjects**

Thank you for your interest in this study of law enforcement couple experiences with work-related traumatic stress. Below is information regarding this study.

**Title of Project:** Exploring the Impact of Work-Related Traumatic Stress on Law Enforcement Couples

**Researchers:** Avery Campbell, M.S. Candidate  
 Co-Investigator

571-356-9348/averyca@vt.edu  
**Telephone/e-mail**

Ashley Landers, Ph.D  
 Principal Investigator, Committee Chair

703-538-3796/land0552@vt.edu  
**Telephone/e-mail**

**I. Purpose of Research:** This thesis research study is being conducted in fulfillment of the degree requirements for a master's in marriage and family therapy with the intent of publication. The purpose of the current study is to explore law enforcement couples' experiences of work-related traumatic stress.

**II. Procedures:** You will be asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire (5 to 10 minutes) and an audio-recorded interview lasting approximately 90-120 over the phone.

**III. Risks:** The researchers anticipate minimal risks for participating in this research study. Some interview questions may cause emotional discomfort, depending on personal experiences with the topic of the study.

If the interview becomes too emotionally distressing, the interview will cease, and researcher will provide mental health referrals should you wish to further process the thoughts and emotions that arise from the interview. Payment for service from any mental health providers to which you are referred shall be your responsibility, and shall not be covered by the researchers, nor Virginia Tech.

**IV. Benefits:** The answers you provide will help us learn about explore law enforcement couples' experiences of work-related traumatic stress so that mental health clinicians may better serve couples in which at least one partner is a law enforcement professional. Talking about your experiences may provide a cathartic benefit to you; however, no promise or guarantee of benefits has been made as an incentive for your participation.

**V. Confidentiality:** Every effort will be made to keep the information you provide strictly confidential. All identifying information provided in the audio-recorded interview will be removed and replaced with aliases in the typed transcript and study report.



Individuals with access to the audio recording and original transcript include the Principal Investigator, the Co-Investigator, and professional transcriptionists. The audiotapes will be destroyed as soon as they have been transcribed and checked.

Any identifiable information will be stored separately and securely from the coded data to protect your confidentiality. Portions of your interview text may be used verbatim in the thesis report and/or in subsequent publications, however, your name and other identifying information will not be disclosed on any reports or publications.

Please note the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (IRB) may view the study's data for auditing purposes. The IRB is responsible for the oversight of the protection of human participants involved in research.

**VI. Compensation:** Each couple that opts in will be entered into a raffle for one of two \$50 dollar gift cards for your participation. The raffle will be conducted after interviews have been completed with all participants. Please indicate if you would like to be entered in the raffle below:

We do want to be entered in the raffle.

We do not want to be entered in the raffle.

**VII. Freedom to Withdraw:** It is important for you to know that you are free to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty. You are free not to answer any questions that you choose or respond to what is being asked of you without penalty.

Please note that there may be circumstances under which the investigator may determine that a participant should not continue in the research study.

Should you withdraw or otherwise discontinue participation, you will be entered into the gift card raffle in accordance with the Compensation section of this document.

**VIII. Questions or Concerns.** Should you have any questions about this study, you may contact one of the research investigators whose contact information is included at the beginning of this document.

Should you have any questions or concerns about the study's conduct or your rights as a research participant, or need to report a research-related injury or event, you may contact the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board at [irb@vt.edu](mailto:irb@vt.edu) or (540) 231-3732.

**IX. Participant's Verbal Consent:** The Verbal Consent has been read to you explaining the conditions of this project. Do you have any questions? Do you hereby acknowledge what has been verbally read to you and give your voluntary consent?

**Please Note:** The verbal consent script will be read to participants who are unable to give written consent (e.g., they are being interviewed by phone and do not have a means to return the written

consent). A copy of the written consent will be physically mailed or emailed to the participant prior to obtaining verbal consent.

The Co-Investigator, Avery Campbell, will obtain verbal consent from each participant in place of written consent. Avery Campbell will sign and date this verbal consent script sheet to document each participant's consent.

**Researcher Signature:**

**Date:**

A witness to the oral presentation and verbal consent will be documented. The witness of the verbal consent will sign and date this verbal consent script sheet to document the participant's consent.

**Witness Signature:**

**Date:**

## **Appendix G Resources for Participants**

### **United States National Suicide and Crisis Hotlines**

1. National Hope Line Network - 1- 800- Suicide
2. National Suicide Prevention Lifeline – 1-800-273-Talk

### **DC/MD/NOVA Suicide and Crisis Hotlines**

1. Crisis Link - (703) 527-4077
2. Fairfax County Emergency Services - (703) 573-5679
3. DC ACCESS Helpline- 1-888-7WE-HELP
4. Maryland Crisis Hotline – dial 2-1-1 and choose option 1; Text 898-211
5. Crisis Link Text Line - Text "CONNECT" to 855-11 and a PRS Crisis Link volunteer will respond within minutes

### **Law Enforcement/First Responder Hotlines**

1. Copline – 1 (800) 267-5463
2. Safe Call Now – (206) 459-3020
3. Cop 2 Cop – 1 (866) 267-2267
4. Gina Gallivan & Associates – (714) 379-8000
5. Veterans Crisis Line – 1 (800) 273-8255

**Appendix H**  
**Confidentiality Agreement for use with Transcription Services**

**Research Study Title: Exploring the Impact of Work-Related Traumatic Stress on Law Enforcement Couples**

1. I, (transcriptionist), agree to maintain full confidentiality of all research data received from the research team related to this research study.
2. I will hold in strictest confidence the identity of any individual that may be revealed during the transcription of interviews or in any associated documents.
3. I will not make copies of any audio-recordings, video-recordings, or other research data, unless specifically requested to do so by the researcher.
4. I will not provide the research data to any third parties without the client's consent.
5. I will store all study-related data in a safe, secure location as long as they are in my possession. All audio recordings will be stored in an encrypted format.
6. All data provided or created for purposes of this agreement, including any back-up records, will be returned to the research team or permanently deleted once the transcription is complete. When I have received confirmation that the transcription work that I performed has been satisfactorily completed, any of the research data that remains with me will be returned to the research team or destroyed, pursuant to the instructions of the research team.
7. I understand that Virginia Tech has the right to take legal action against any breach of confidentiality that occurs in my handling of the research data.

Transcriber's name (printed) \_\_\_\_\_

Transcriber's signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix I**

### **Interview Guide**

Participants will be asked to provide their own definition of work-related traumatic stress in the experiences that they describe. The researcher's definition of trauma is broadly described as emotional or psychological injury resulting from stressful or life-threatening, work-related events. Before we get started, it may be important for you to know that I have a personal connection with the law enforcement community. My father was an officer for many years and my brother completed his officer training a few years ago. While I have my own family experiences with law enforcement, I am interested in your experiences (which may or may not be different than my own).

I am interested in understanding your experiences as a couple when you (directed towards law enforcement professional) have been exposed to work-related traumatic stress. I am specifically interested in knowing about your experiences as a couple.

- (1) What is your lived experience as a couple of the impact of work-related traumatic stress on your relationship?
- (2) I would like to start by asking you to think of an occasion of when you noticed a direct impact of work-related traumatic stress on your couple's relationship. Can you describe your experiences of this occasion? How did you attribute meaning to this situation as a couple?
- (3) Similar to the earlier question, but stated a little differently just to see if it jogs any other thoughts, in what ways do you believe your work-related traumatic stress impacts your relationship as a couple?
- (4) What, if any, impact has work-related traumatic stress had on your relationship stability?
- (5) What, if any, impact has work-related traumatic stress had on your relationship satisfaction?
- (6) How do you cope with work-related traumatic stress as individuals and as a couple?

Some of these areas you may have touched on and others you may not have. I am interested in hearing about how work-related traumatic events affect your relationship:

- Communication (thoughts/feeling shared)
- Quality time (impact how you spend time together)
- Conflict (contributes to conflict)
- Financial Management
- Intimacy and your sexual relationship
- Relationships with Friends/Relatives (time spent with others or the relationships themselves)
- Children and Parenting
- Role Relationship (your decision making or responsibilities)
- Spiritual Beliefs (spiritual or religious values or beliefs)

## Appendix J Demographic Questionnaire

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study exploring the impact of work-related traumatic stress on law enforcement couples. Before we begin the interview, I have a brief demographic questionnaire. If you are uncomfortable answering any of the following questions, you may choose to not answer those questions.

### **Law Enforcement Professional**

1. How old are you in years?
2. What is your gender?
  - Male
  - Female
  - Trans-identified
  - Other (fill in the blank)
3. What is your race?
  - White
  - Black or African American
  - Hispanic, Latino, Spanish
  - American Indian or Alaska Native
  - Asian
  - Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
  - Other (fill in the blank)
2. Are you of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?
  - No, not of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin
  - Yes, Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano
  - Yes, Puerto Rican
  - Yes, Cuban
  - Yes, another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin: (fill in the blank)
4. What is the highest degree or level of education you've completed?
  - Less than high school diploma
  - Completed high school diploma or the equivalent (e.g., GED)
  - Completed trade, technical or vocational school
  - Completed some college
  - Bachelor's degree
  - Master's degree
  - Doctorate degree
5. What are your religious or spiritual beliefs or affiliations?
  - Christian (Catholic, Protestant, Other)
  - Jewish
  - Muslim
  - Buddhist
  - Hindi
  - Tao
  - Atheist

Pagan  
Other:

6. What is your employment status?
  - Employed, working 40 or more hours per week
  - Employed, working 1-39 hours per week
  - Not employed, looking for work
  - Not employed, NOT looking for work
  - Retired
  - Disabled, not able to work
7. What is your rank?
  - Officer
  - Corporal
  - Sergeant
  - Lieutenant
  - Captain
  - Deputy Police Chief
  - Chief of Police
  - Federal
8. What is the length of time in years that you have been in service?
9. In what county, state, or jurisdiction do you work?
10. Is your position local, state, or federal?
  - County
  - State
  - Federal

### **Partner/Spouse**

1. How old are you in years?
2. What is your gender?
  - Male
  - Female
  - Trans-identified
  - Other (fill in the blank)
3. What is your race?
  - White
  - Black or African American
  - Hispanic, Latino, Spanish
  - American Indian or Alaska Native
  - Asian
  - Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
  - Other (fill in the blank)
3. Are you of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?
  - No, not of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin
  - Yes, Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano
  - Yes, Puerto Rican

Yes, Cuban

Yes, another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin: (fill in the blank)

4. What is the highest degree or level of education you've completed?
  - Less than high school diploma
  - Completed high school diploma or the equivalent (e.g., GED)
  - Completed trade, technical or vocational school
  - Completed some college
  - Bachelor's degree
  - Master's degree
  - Doctorate degree
5. What are your religious or spiritual beliefs or affiliations?
  - Christian (Catholic, Protestant, Other)
  - Jewish
  - Muslim
  - Buddhist
  - Hindi
  - Tao
  - Atheist
  - Pagan
  - Other:
6. What is your employment status?
  - Employed, working 40 or more hours per week
  - Employed, working 1-39 hours per week
  - Not employed, looking for work
  - Not employed, NOT looking for work
  - Retired
  - Disabled, not able to work
7. What is your profession?

### **Couple**

1. What is your relationship status?
  - Committed Relationship
  - Cohabiting
  - Engaged
  - Married
  - Separated
  - Divorced
2. What is the length of your couple's relationship in years?
3. Do you have children?
  - Yes
    - How many?
    - Are any from a previous relationship?
    - What are their ages?
  - No



4. What is your household annual income? This includes money from jobs; net income from business, farm, or rent; pensions; dividends; interest; social security payments; and any other money income received by members of your HOUSEHOLD that are EIGHTEEN (18) years of age or older. Please report the total amount of money earned - do not subtract the amount you paid in taxes or any deductions listed on your tax return.

Less than \$20,000

\$20,000 - \$39,999

\$40,000 - \$69,999

\$70,000 - \$99,999

\$100,000 or More

Table 1  
Sample Characteristics

	Total Sample ( <i>n</i> = 14)		Law Enforcement Professional ( <i>n</i> = 7)			Spouse ( <i>n</i> = 7)		
	Mean	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	Percent or Mean	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	Percent or Mean	<i>SD</i>
<b>Individual-level Traits</b>								
Age (range)		38.00			9.17			
	<i>n</i>	Percent	<i>n</i>	Percent		<i>n</i>	Percent	9.93
<b>Gender</b>								
Male	7	50.00	7	87.50				
Female	7	50.00	1	12.50		6	100.00	
<b>Race</b>								
White	13	92.86	8	100.00		5	83.33	
Asian/White	1	7.14				1	16.67	
<b>Education</b>								
High school diploma or GED	2	14.29	1	12.50		1	16.67	
Some college/tech school (no degree)	2	14.29	2	25.00				
Associate's degree	1	7.14	1	12.50				
Bachelor's degree	4	28.57	1	12.50		3	50.00	
Graduate or advanced professional degree	5	35.71	3	37.50		2	33.33	
<b>Religious Affiliation</b>								
Christian	11	78.57	6	75.00		5	83.33	
None	3	21.43	2	25.00		1	16.67	
<b>Couples (<i>n</i> = 7)</b>								
<b>Couple-level Traits</b>								
<b>Household Income</b>								
\$40,000-\$69,999	1	14.29						
\$75,000-\$99,999	1	14.29						
\$100,000 or more	5	71.43						
Length of Relationship (4 - 31)		13.00			8.25			
Number of Children (1 - 10)		4.00			3.16			
Child age (2 - 29)		15.20			7.61			